PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

SIXTH SERIES—VOLUME 324

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

SECOND SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FORTY-SEVENTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 1998–99

COMPRISING PERIOD
25 January—4 February 1999

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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE SECOND SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 7 MAY 1997]

FORTY-SEVENTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 324**

THIRD VOLUME OF SESSION 1998–99

House of Commons

Monday 25 January 1999

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

The Gulf (Security)

1. **Mr. Andrew Dismore** (Hendon): If he will make a statement on the security situation in the Gulf. [65523]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. George Robertson): Saddam Hussein's war machine has been seriously weakened by Operation Desert Fox. We estimate that 87 per cent. of targets were either destroyed or damaged—a very impressive performance. Saddam's ability to make or use chemical and biological weapons or otherwise threaten his neighbours has been set back significantly. He, however, remains the greatest threat to security in the Gulf, and we are now acting to contain him in the future.

Mr. Dismore: Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must continue to patrol the no-fly zones to protect the Kurds and Marsh Arabs from further atrocities at the hands of Saddam Hussein, whose complete and flagrant disregard for United Nations resolutions and human rights is plain for all to see? Does my right hon. Friend also agree that attempted comparisons between Saddam Hussein's brutal dictatorship and the democracy of the state of Israel are wholly fallacious and misplaced?

Mr. Robertson: My hon. Friend is right about the no-fly zones. They were established for good and humanitarian purposes, inasmuch as Saddam Hussein had at various times threatened and attacked the Shia Muslims in the south of his country and the Kurds in the north. We shall continue to patrol the zones, although this isolated and increasingly desperate dictator is clearly using them, and the violations of them, to heighten the temperature. He has violated the zones well over 50 times, and his missiles have repeatedly tracked and threatened our aircraft.

We will continue the patrols, and any attempt to interfere with or attack coalition aircraft will be met with an appropriate and robust response.

There is no comparison between a democracy such as Israel, and a complete and utter dictatorship such as Saddam's Iraq.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip–Northwood): Will the Secretary of State congratulate the officers and men of 12 Squadron Royal Air Force, whose offensive operations from Kuwait during Operation Desert Fox were greatly admired by, I think, the whole House and the country? Will he assure us that there will be enough Tornado aircraft for units to be rotated through the Gulf and to be stationed there for an appropriate length of time, in view of the rundown of aircraft to meet the requirement for midlife updates, and the rundown of squadrons envisaged by the strategic defence review?

Mr. Robertson: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's commendation of 12 Squadron. I, too, commended its members when I greeted them at RAF Lossiemouth on their return from the Gulf. I shook hands with every individual who came off the plane. We are all very proud

of what the squadron did in the name of international law and order. They all—ground and air crew—went out to risk their lives in the interests of the safety of the states in the Gulf region.

I assure the hon. Gentleman that there is no question of our not having the resources to ensure that Tornado aircraft are there, as part of our containment policy in relation to Saddam and also to police the no-fly zones. These are important missions, and they will be well staffed.

Mr. George Galloway (Glasgow, Kelvin): My right hon. Friend's robust defence of Mr. Netanyahu's Israel will have been widely noted by those in Arab and Muslim circles who watch our debates. He did not, robustly or otherwise, refer to the missiles that struck the ancient Arab port city of Basra this morning, leading—as this afternoon's television showed us—to the death of innocent women and children whose houses were bombed by the Smart missiles of whose staggering accuracy we were told in December.

As my right hon. Friend's policy is now bereft of support from any country in the world except the United States, Britain and Israel, is it not time that this verminous desert fox was put to sleep?

Mr. Robertson: Once again, it will be noticed that my hon. Friend did not utter a word of criticism about Saddam Hussein, what he is doing and what he has done in the past. We shall note other comments carefully in the light of that.

Let me point out to my hon. Friend that yesterday the Government of Iraq stormed out of a meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Arab League, on the basis that they were not receiving the support that they required from the Arab countries. Nor have they and nor will they, because the Arab countries see Saddam Hussein as the man responsible for bringing on his own people the iniquities of which he makes so much.

The recent Operation Desert Fox took place with precision guided weapons. The world, and, indeed, the Iraqi regime, have not been able to make capital out of collateral damage or civilian deaths, but, in the wake of that, Saddam has chosen to violate the no-fly zones set up in support of UN Security Council Resolution 688. He shows no compunction in deploying surface-to-air missiles into urban areas as well.

On our part, however, we take care during any action, whether it be offensive, for example, Operation Desert Fox, which was directed against his military and war machine, or whether it is in response to attacks on the aircraft in the no-fly zones. We cannot take into account actions taken by Saddam Hussein when he moves his missiles around. Iraqi claims of civilian casualties today are being investigated, but it is much too early to expect an outcome.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): Is not the fragility of the security situation in the Gulf caused by Iraq's military manoeuvres near the Kuwaiti border; by the radar tracking of aircraft which endeavour to enforce the no-fly zones; and by Iraq's attempted intimidation of other Arab Governments? Does the Secretary of State recognise that the resistance of those Governments at the weekend provides an opportunity for increased co-operation between this Government and those countries and between the European Union and those countries, so as to maintain the political consensus against Saddam Hussein?

Mr. Robertson: I congratulate the right hon. and learned Gentleman on his elevation to the Privy Council. He is absolutely right. Indeed, the recent threats by the Deputy Prime Minister of Iraq against Kuwait showed precisely what are still Saddam's objectives in that area. Therefore, we will stay alert. That is why HMS Invincible is on her way and will arrive in the Gulf region within the next few days. I am also delighted to be able to tell the House that the invitation to tender for the initial assessment phase of the new carrier project has been released to industry today. It is a huge signal of our continued interest in the safety of the countries in the Gulf that we have sent HMS Invincible, an asset of undoubted character, quality and, indeed, intimidation to Saddam. Future generations will be able to rely on a successor generation of aircraft carriers.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the only reason why sanctions on Iraq are not lifted is Saddam Hussein's behaviour? If he kept to the UN resolutions, the sanctions would be lifted.

What progress has been made towards extending the no-fly zones to a no-drive zone? The Kurds in the north and the Shias in the south are concerned that Saddam Hussein seems to be making even more nasty noises in their direction than he has in recent months.

Mr. Robertson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, as she has been for a long time, in pointing out that sanctions can easily be lifted on the decision of Saddam Hussein himself. He has that within his gift if he simply complies with the terms of the UN Security Council resolutions to which he adhered at the end of the Gulf war. We must therefore judge his complaints about the nature of the impact of sanctions in the light of the fact that it would be relatively simple for him to disclose his past history of holding weapons of mass destruction, ensure that those weapons were destroyed and give the assurances that are required by the international community about his future behaviour.

We believe that the no-fly zones in northern and southern Iraq are sufficient at the moment to contain Saddam Hussein's hostile intent against the domestic population in those areas, but any subsequent moves that he makes will be examined with a view to seeing what more can be done to ensure that his population and the populations of surrounding countries are protected.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): Given that the Prime Minister has told us that we have put Saddam back in his cage and that the Secretary of State has confirmed that, with 87 per cent. accuracy, we have degraded Saddam's military capability, when will the Secretary of State consider that we have achieved our military objectives? As we dig in deeper in the region, what are the political objectives and will they require further military commitment?

Mr. Robertson: The Prime Minister stated at the beginning of Operation Desert Fox that the objective of the military operation was to degrade Saddam Hussein's

military capabilities and to reduce the threat that he posed to his neighbours. It is the assessment of our Government and of the Government of the United States—with whom we were in partnership—that we have inflicted so much damage on Saddam's war machine that it has put his capability to threaten his neighbours back for one year, certainly, and perhaps for up to two years. The objective now is to produce a political track that, along with the military track, will contain Saddam's ability to threaten his neighbours and get us to the point at which he will comply with the Security Council resolutions and make the Gulf and the wider middle eastern region safer than it is today.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Did my right hon. Friend see the very interesting article by Marie Colvin in *The Sunday Times* yesterday, drawing attention to the development of an enclave in southern Iraq? That policy is being pursued by the Americans. I have repeatedly asked for such a policy on a Basra enclave. Could we enter into discussions with the Americans on the development of such a policy and find ways in which we can contribute, because some of us believe that that is the only way to sort out the dilemma?

Mr. Robertson: As it happens, I did not manage to read that article in *The Sunday Times* yesterday, but I recognise that some people hold strongly to the view that that is a way to deal with the threat that Saddam Hussein poses to his own population and to the rest of the region. We are considering all such ideas, together with our discussions with the Iraqi opposition. The main message that we have to get across to the international community and to the people of Iraq, by whatever means possible, is that Iraq has a proud future among the nations of the world, but that it is unlikely to be able to play a dignified part in world affairs as long as Saddam Hussein leads the current regime.

Parachute Regiment

2. **Mr. Bob Russell** (Colchester): When he will announce the location of the Parachute Regiment as a result of the strategic defence review. [65524]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. George Robertson): I hope to be able to announce the future location of the Parachute Regiment in the near future.

Mr. Russell: Does the Secretary of State accept that there is a lot of anxiety in the garrison towns of Colchester and Aldershot about where the Parachute Regiment will eventually be based, given that the strategic defence review proposed that 24 Air Mobile Brigade in Colchester should be brought together with the Parachute Regiment in Aldershot? Surely the time is long overdue for that anxiety to be put to one side. All the personnel, military and civilian, should know what is going on.

Mr. Robertson: The hon. Gentleman is right and we shall be able to do that shortly. I understand the concerns that he expresses on behalf of his constituents. He will be aware that a large number of moves—in the military as well as the geographical sense—were necessary in association with the creation of two new brigade formations that arose from the strategic defence review. The issues are coming to a head and I hope to be able to make an announcement soon.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): While my right hon. Friend is considering the future of the paras, will he also consider the future of the 101 Battalion Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers and ensure that we get correct answers in the House? Will he ask the National Audit Office to investigate the misleading financial information that has come out?

Mr. Robertson: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his tenacious approach to the decision that we put forward on the restructuring and modernisation of the Territorial Army. My hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces will have heard his words. All the decisions in the strategic defence review and the restructuring of the Territorial Army that was part of it were carefully considered in the wider context. The National Audit Office has a remit to look at all aspects of my Department, which it regularly does.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): The Secretary of State persists with the fiction that no decision has been made, but it is not good enough to tell the House that. Is he aware that the *Aldershot News* carries detailed information from documents provided by the military showing the advanced stage of the plans to move the Parachute Regiment and 5 Airborne Brigade from Aldershot to Colchester? It is not acceptable for the right hon. Gentleman to persist with the suggestion that no decision has been made, when the military has all the plans. May I remind him that the Defence Select Committee suggested that the Secretary of State, in making the decision—which appears to have been made, according to the reports—ought to give full justification for any move from Aldershot?

Mr. Robertson: May I make it absolutely clear to the hon. Gentleman that the decision has not been taken? Ministers in my Department make decisions, and the relevant decision has not been made. Recommendations may be circulating among those up the military structure, but at the top of the chain of command are Ministers of the Crown, and we will take the decision.

I understand that we have a friendly rivalry between the hon. Members representing the two garrison towns affected—the hon. Members for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) and for Colchester (Mr. Russell)—and I can assure them that a wise and proper decision will be made. Aldershot is one of the four main Army garrison towns in the United Kingdom and the people there have always regarded themselves as a major part of the British Army. That will continue to be the case. Whatever the precise composition of the units at Aldershot, I do not reckon that there will be any great alteration to the numbers of people who are based there.

Although we have not made a decision about the Parachute Regiment's location, I can announce that the Joint Helicopter Command—which will be part and parcel of that decision—will be based at the Army's Land Command headquarters at Wilton in Wiltshire. The headquarters will form on 1 October this year and will be fully operational by 1 April next year. Some 12,000

service personnel and 350 helicopters will, in the first instance, come under the command of Air Vice-Marshal David Niven.

Gulf War Veterans

3. **Mr. Chris Pond** (Gravesham): What measures he is taking to investigate the cause of health problems among Gulf war veterans. [65525]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. Doug Henderson): My Department is supporting research into Gulf veterans' illnesses, which currently comprises two major epidemiological studies, a neuromuscular symptoms study, an independent review of research literature and a programme to investigate possible interactions between the medical countermeasures which were used during the 1990-91 Gulf conflict. Scientific research is, of course, only part of a wider programme of work by the MOD to address Gulf veterans' health concerns, which will continue for as long as it is needed.

Mr. Pond: Will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to Nigel Thompson, a severely disabled Gulf war veteran, who was recently presented with an award by the Prime Minister and opposition leaders for outstanding achievement through his work for the Royal British Legion and other veterans of the conflict? Although the recent King's college research concluded that there was no such thing as Gulf war syndrome, those engaged in the conflict did suffer from a number of conditions which were associated with their participation. Will my hon. Friend examine ways in which those brave people can be compensated adequately for those conditions?

Mr. Henderson: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, and I join him in commending the work of Nigel Thompson, a Gulf war veteran. I wish to reassure people such as Nigel, who served in the Gulf and may be ill, that we are doing everything that we can to get to the bottom of what happened in the Gulf, and to try to find out what illnesses people suffered from and the cause of them. We are trying to find out how we can prevent those illnesses from recurring, and we are trying to help those currently suffering, including those who may be entitled to compensation. Those who are suffering can receive war pensions, but we are continuing to assess whether there are any other payments for which they may claim. I reassure my hon. Friend and the House that if compensation should be paid, it will be paid.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Is the Minister aware of the damage that is being done to the morale of the excellent and dedicated teams of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency by the continued uncertainty about their prospects? In the light of that concern, will the hon. Gentleman take this opportunity to give a definite date for the publication of firm proposals on the future of the Defence Diversification Agency and that of DERA?

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is totally out of order. We are moving on.

Defence Diversification Agency

4. **Mr. Brian Jenkins** (Tamworth): If he will make a statement on progress towards establishing a Defence Diversification Agency. [65527]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. John Spellar): As we foreshadowed in our November White Paper, the Defence Diversification Agency began work last month under its director designate, Joe Carr, fulfilling yet another Government manifesto commitment. Officials are currently discussing with the Cabinet Office the appropriate status of the Defence Diversification Council, which will assist in the strategic oversight of the agency's work.

Mr. Jenkins: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer, that information and that good news. Will the agency work with other groups, and in particular with the new regional development agencies? Will it be tasked with trying to regenerate areas that were formerly dependent on defence work, starting the long programme of regeneration that was so sorely neglected by the previous Government?

Mr. Spellar: We very much look forward to working with the regional development agencies, some of which have already started to be very active. Our work can dovetail with theirs, but they have a specific role and specific statutory duties while the agency will spread out the considerable body of scientific and technical knowledge that exists in Government laboratories to ensure that it is used much more widely in the commercial and industrial worlds, to the benefit of both working people and the economy.

Information Warfare

5. **Mrs. Jacqui Lait** (Beckenham): What steps are being taken to counter the threat of information warfare. [65528]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. John Spellar): As I explained to the hon. Lady in the Adjournment debate on information warfare on 4 November 1998, the Ministry of Defence has a wide range of measures in place to protect its systems from the threat of information warfare.

Mrs. Lait: If a 15-year-old can break an encryption code, is the Minister worried that the defence encryption codes could be equally easily broken? If a pilotless Tornado is run by software that could be written abroad and hence be open to malign interference, does that concern him? When can we expect the statement that I was promised in that Adjournment debate—a promise that was repeated by two civil servants a month later? How short is shortly?

Mr. Spellar: Very shortly. As I said in that Adjournment debate, the Government attach great importance to the protection of key information technology systems both in government and in the private sector, and we will very shortly announce new initiatives to enhance the defence of the critical national infrastructure against the risk of a disabling electronic attack.

We have several mechanisms for protecting information systems, one of which is restricting access. There are differences between the systems here and in other countries, and we have greater physical protections, so we cannot read across into this country from experiences abroad. We also undertake rigorous examination and checking of the software that is put in our equipment; and of course the Y2K problem is very much occupying the attention of our information technology people at this very moment.

Mr. Ken Maginnis (Fermanagh and South Tyrone): On information warfare, but much closer to home, does the Minister consider that it would be a futile exercise to caution the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Minister with responsibility for security about their foolhardiness in disseminating operational information for political reasons? Does he recognise the fact that currently and, more especially, in the future, if the violence escalates once again, soldiers' lives will be jeopardised by those Ministers—his colleagues—making public statements about operational matters? Is not it about time that the two Ministers concerned stopped pandering to the IRA in order to keep the ceasefire going?

Mr. Spellar: We certainly do not recognise that situation. I can reassure the hon. Gentleman and the House that no Ministers in the Government would ever jeopardise in any way the operations or the security of our forces.

Armed Forces (Civil Emergencies)

6. **Mr. Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough): If he will make a statement on the capacity of the armed forces to assist the civil power in emergencies. [65529]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. Doug Henderson): There are long-standing and well-tried arrangements under which the civil authorities can request military assistance in an emergency. The capacity to assist depends at any time on the extent of other high-priority defence commitments and the nature of the assistance requested. Where urgent military assistance is sought to save lives, such requests take priority and the assistance is always given.

Mr. Leigh: I recall that, when some of us set up the National Council for Civil Defence 15 years ago, we were given detailed assurances by the then Government about the ability of the Territorial Army to help in such emergencies. How will the recent cuts in the TA footprint across the country help the remaining units to assist the civil power? If the Minister cannot give a helpful reply, will he explain what other armed forces are ready to step in and whether they are not already overstretched?

Mr. Henderson: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that he has asked that question on a previous occasion. I told him then that the armed forces have a responsibility to assist in civil defence when they are requested so to do, and that, in the vast majority of cases, that assistance is supplied by our regular forces. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would want to join me in commending B Company of the 1st Battalion of the Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment, which helped in the search for the two girls who went missing in Sussex last week.

The capacity to help with civil defence does exist. In some circumstances, the Territorial Army has added to that capacity and, under our streamlining reforms, it will continue to be able to do so.

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): As my hon. Friend may be aware, the Scarborough barracks site in Doncaster, currently the home of 219 Squadron Royal Logistic Corps, has been identified by the civil powers for use as a temporary mortuary in the event of a major disaster in South Yorkshire. Will my hon. Friend assure me that that role will be taken into account in any review of the continued use of such sites?

Mr. Henderson: I hope that I can reassure my hon. Friend that we continue to value the important contribution that the armed forces can make to civil defence provisions. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary has already corresponded with people in the Doncaster area, and will continue to do so as he deals with the specific points that have been raised by the local community.

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): On the question of the Territorial Army footprint, is the Minister satisfied that geographical considerations have been taken fully into account? Will he pay particular attention to the position of Squadrons 236 and 237, whose sappers have done so much work in many of the emergencies that arise because of weather conditions in the north of Scotland? Is it not possible to retain at least one combined unit in that area?

Mr. Henderson: I am sure that the hon. Lady will accept that, when the review took place, very careful attention was paid to the United Kingdom's more remote geographical areas, including the area that she represents. I hope that she will also recognise that the ability to deploy resources wherever they are needed throughout the whole of the country is a valuable asset and that to undertake such provision solely in a Scottish context might incur much higher costs.

We have taken extreme care to ensure that the TA footprint is present in the north of Scotland, and a significant TA facility was retained in Elgin, which, of course, will be able to help the community anywhere in the hon. Lady's constituency.

Kosovo

7. **Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe** (Bradford, South): If he will make a statement on the security situation in Kosovo. [65530]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. George Robertson): The continuing killings and provocations by both the Kosovo Liberation Army and the Serbs constitute a spiralling escalation of violence which risks creating a humanitarian catastrophe. We all deplore this.

Verifiers from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe continue to report on the situation on the ground and to seek ways of reducing tension. Their constructive efforts have, in the past few days, secured the release of a number of hostages. The only way in which long-term stability can be restored in Kosovo is through political dialogue. The Contact Group, which met

on 22 January, is intensifying its effort to cajole both sides towards a settlement. We and the other North Atlantic Treaty Organisation allies nevertheless are taking preparatory steps to ensure that we are ready to take military action should this be required.

Four more RAF Harriers are shortly to join the four other RAF Harriers and the much larger allied air force, which is already in Italy, and HMS Iron Duke is in the Adriatic as part of a NATO force.

Nothing can justify the tragic events of 15 January, when 45 Kosovar Albanians were massacred, but both sides must share the blame for the on-going conflict. The Kosovo Liberation Army continues to use violence and terror against the people of Kosovo, but the primary responsibility for the crisis in Kosovo clearly lies with President Milosevic. He must show the vision to negotiate and reach a settlement now.

Mr. Sutcliffe: I thank my right hon. Friend for that full answer. He will know of the horror felt by people in this country at the events in Kosovo. What action is being taken? How many British troops and observers are deployed and how does that compare with those of other nations?

Mr. Robertson: I welcome my hon. Friend's question. As of 19 January, 866 OSCE verifiers were on the ground in Kosovo, of whom 110 are being provided by the United Kingdom. I pay tribute to them and to their leader General John Drewienkiewicz, who is understandably known as General DZ—I deliberately stumbled over the pronunciation so that hon. Members would understand why, Madam Speaker. All those 110, as well as the other members of the verification mission, have shown considerable courage, great skill and, in many cases, bravery, in the job that they are doing. The number of verifiers will continue to grow until it reaches a steady state at 1,500, with the United Kingdom providing 150. Additionally, we have troops in Macedonia as part of the extraction force, and Royal Air Force planes are also involved in the air surveillance operations over Kosovo.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): Does not the presence of unarmed observers not only put their lives at risk in an unprecedented way, but offer both sides a hostage-taking opportunity? Does the Secretary of State think that our unarmed observers in Kosovo will have taken heart from the news that Her Majesty's Government recently begged the Yemeni Government, in a parallel situation, not to take military action against hostage takers?

Mr. Robertson: I will not rise to the comparison with the Yemen. General DZ and others who went out to Kosovo and who have knowledge on the ground believe that it is imperative for members of the verification force to be unarmed because of their role. They are the eyes and ears of the outside world in what is a very troubled area at present. They went into Kosovo as a result of the pressure caused by the military action threatened against President Milosevic and the Serbian authorities. As part of the Holbrooke agreement, Milosevic is obliged to guarantee their safety. They are in a dangerous situation and I would not underestimate it—nor would they—but they are playing a vital role. They have saved countless thousands of lives as a simple result of being there. All the time, President Milosevic has to recognise that Nato's actord—the activation order, which enables NATO to decide on air strikes when we choose—remains valid.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): Given the vital role of NATO in the security situation in Kosovo, and given that the Washington summit later this year is to consider a new role and concept for the organisation on its 50th anniversary, will my right hon. Friend and the Government study that security situation to find out whether we can expand NATO's role as a peacekeeping force for policing human rights and avoiding conflict throughout the world?

Mr. George Robertson: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. For many years, NATO's role was to act as the counterbalance to the threat of the Warsaw pact and the Soviet Union, but it has come into its own in the modern world as a force and power for good. We must recognise that as winter came on and 250,000 Kosovar Albanians faced death through cold or starvation, it was NATO's integrated military command and planning that created the situation where those lives were saved. I know that my hon. Friend well recognises that the situation is infinitely complex. It is not susceptible to easy, glib solutions and I hope that no hon. Member would suggest that it could be. The military pressure is still on President Milosevic. The ultimate responsibility is still on him to sign up to the clear, practical and modest demands of the international community, as articulated in the Contact Group last Friday. Both sides have a responsibility to adhere to the ceasefire, but if President Milosevic signed up to the list of demands, peace could be achieved very quickly.

Mr. John Maples (Stratford–on–Avon): The Secretary of State told us that NATO countries are making the necessary preparations to resume the bombing campaign against Serbia. Is it true that at the Contact Group meeting or afterwards, Britain joined other European nations in vetoing United States proposals to give Milosevic a 96-hour ultimatum before commencing bombing?

Mr. Robertson: There was no veto on any proposal put forward. The Contact Group met at officials level last Friday and put forward a series of demands in a document that has been published. The actords remain in place. That in itself is an ultimatum to President Milosevic that unless he complies with the agreement that he voluntarily reached, the actords can very quickly be made meaningful in terms of air power.

Mr. Maples: I take it from that answer that the newspaper reports are correct that the United States proposals were not acceptable to other European countries. I want to press the Secretary of State further on Government policy, particularly on the use of ground troops. In a question to the Prime Minister last Wednesday, the Liberal Democrat leader said that if all other means of preventing Kosovo from descending into civil war fail,

"we may . . . have to consider a NATO ground force in Kosovo."

The Prime Minister replied:

"we would certainly not rule out the possibility of participation in the use of ground forces."—[*Official Report*, 20 January 1999; Vol. 323, c. 904.]

That clearly implies the use of ground forces in Kosovo before a peace agreement has been concluded. Is it now the policy of the Government that British ground forces might be deployed in Kosovo while Serbia and the KLA are still fighting?

Mr. Robertson: It is a neat debating trick, but it is not fair or reasonable to say that, because I made it clear that no veto was necessary last Friday, I am admitting that there was some veto on an ultimatum. The discussions were within the Contact Group and produced a unanimous outcome. That would have involved officials of the United States of America and the Russian Federation as well as of the United Kingdom. A consensus was established. There is no suggestion of any form of ultimatum within the time span that has been put forward, but there is an ultimatum on the table. It is part and parcel of the Holbrooke agreement. The actords uniquely remain in place. We have made it clear that if President Milosevic is not willing to comply with the agreement that he came to, we can act, and we will act, if necessary, without notice.

The hon. Gentleman quoted the Prime Minister's comments, but with an implication that he chose and that the Prime Minister did not make. If NATO is involved in considering military action, whether from the air or, subsequent to a political agreement, on the ground, Britain would of course want to be associated with any collective decision on that basis. In the meantime, the pressure must be on the two warring parties to establish a political dialogue and come to a long-term agreement, without which there will be no peace in Kosovo. We have made it absolutely clear where the burden of responsibility lies: it is on President Milosevic. If he is not willing to sign up to the Contact Group's modest, concrete, sensible proposals, he will have no one to blame but himself.

Tomahawk

8. **Mr. Tony McNulty** (Harrow, East): If he will make a statement on Britain's Tomahawk land attack capability. [65531]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. John Spellar): Following a successful trials firing, the Tomahawk land attack missile entered service with the Royal Navy last December. TLAM represents a major step forward in capability, enabling precision attacks to be undertaken at long range against selected targets, with a minimal risk to our own forces.

Mr. McNulty: Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating the Royal Navy on its recent display of the Tomahawk capability? Will he elaborate on how that capability fits into a post-strategic defence review defence policy framework?

Mr. Spellar: TLAM offers a potent and credible threat to persuade an aggressor to desist from hostile activity. I join my hon. Friend in congratulating the Royal Navy and all those involved on having brought that capability into service in only a little more than three years.

Global Nuclear Disarmament

9. **Ms Oona King** (Bethnal Green and Bow): What steps the Government are taking to promote global nuclear disarmament. [65532]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. George Robertson): We continue to consider further ways in which to achieve progress towards our goal of the global elimination of nuclear weapons, building on the steps we have taken in the strategic defence review. We keep closely in mind the commitment by the nuclear weapon states to work together for the success of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty review process and related issues. I particularly welcome the reopening in Geneva last week of international negotiations on a treaty banning the production of fissile material for use in nuclear weapons.

Ms King: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, as a result of changes announced under the strategic defence review, Britain will not deploy any more warheads on Trident than were deployed on Polaris when it first entered service? Will he also confirm that more needs to be done urgently to promote multilateral nuclear disarmament, and state what further steps the Government are taking to achieve that end?

Mr. Robertson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her commendation of what we have done under the strategic defence review. By reducing the number of warheads per submarine to no more than under Polaris, we have taken a significant step forward, as that is a reduction of 20 per cent. in the number of warheads per submarine. In addition, we have reduced our stockpiles by one third.

We are taking major steps forward, to such an extent that the United Nations Secretary General said that he welcomed the decisions on nuclear warheads that we took under the strategic review. He said:

"This is an important step towards the general disarmament envisaged in Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and therefore a significant strengthening of that Treaty at a time when developments elsewhere are subjecting it to considerable strain."

I assure my hon. Friend that our commitment, together with that of many other nations, to global nuclear disarmament is real. The changes made under the strategic defence review, much of which has not received the favourable press attention in this country that it deserved, will take us a long way toward achieving that aim.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): I congratulate the Secretary of State on having at last confirmed that the actual reduction in the number of warheads per submarine is 20 per cent., not 50 per cent. as has sometimes been glibly claimed in the past. Will he acknowledge that, in 1972, the world thought that it had achieved the global abolition of germ warfare and biological weapons, but that, 20 years later, President Yeltsin admitted that, in fact, the Russians had reintensified their biological warfare programmes after that treaty? In the unlikely event of the right hon. Gentleman ever managing to achieve global nuclear disarmament, will he have done anything more than make the world safe once more for all-out conventional warfare between major powers, instead of keeping nuclear weapons where they belong, in the hands of democratic powers and used to deter dictators?

Mr. Robertson: The hon. Gentleman has a weird sense of geopolitics if he believes that all nuclear weapons are

currently in the sort of hands that he describes. There is nothing wrong with the global objective, to which the Government are committed, of eliminating nuclear weapons on a multilateral basis. Of course, appropriate verification regimes have to be put in place to ensure that those who say that they taking action, whether in that or other areas, are doing so. That is why we have set in motion work at Aldermaston to develop United Kingdom expertise in the verification of the reduction and elimination of nuclear weapons. That will ensure that, when the time comes for us to enter negotiations, we shall have a national verification capability.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Bishops' Stipends

34. **Mr. Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter): How much account is taken, when setting bishops' stipends, of allowances paid to some bishops for attending the House of Lords. [65557]

Mr. Stuart Bell (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners): These payments represent reimbursement of costs incurred, so bishops' stipends are not adjusted because of them.

Mr. Bradshaw: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that reply. Does he acknowledge that the system has the potential to create great inequality in bishops' ultimate incomes? Does he agree that it perhaps makes sense to pool the money gained from attendance at the House of Lords and to share it out in a true Christian manner among bishops? In the light of the Government's proposals to change the make-up of the upper House, will there be some sort of review of whether to include representatives of other denominations Christian, as well as those of other faiths?

Mr. Bell: I note my hon. Friend's views, but he will have seen and welcomed the White Paper on the future of the upper House, in which the Government state that bishops make a valuable contribution in the House because of their particular perspective and experience. The Church welcomes the Government's proposal to retain the present size of the Bishops Bench, which they accept is justified. In relation to other faiths, the Church has always insisted that it wishes to be inclusive rather than exclusive, so long as that does not touch on the established Church.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Is my hon. Friend aware that many of us welcome the presence of bishops in the upper House, and that it is precisely the fact that they represent areas not only within the south-east establishment but elsewhere in the United Kingdom which gives them the ability to transmit not only the views of their parishioners but frequently those of the many different professions with which they come into constant contact?

Mr. Bell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. She confirms the statement in the White Paper in relation to the bishops—that the present representation makes it possible for the Church to ensure that its perspective is represented on all occasions when it would be of particular value. One has to understand that the Church of England is a part of our community throughout the land and that it reflects the views of our people, which are then reflected in the upper House.

Disposal of Freeholds

35. **Mr. Gordon Prentice** (Pendle): What steps the Commissioners take to ensure that freeholds are not disposed of for less than the best available price. [65559]

Mr. Stuart Bell (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners): The commissioners would normally offer their own property for sale on the open market. When a redundant church is sold or leased, however, financial considerations are not the overriding factor. Rather, the priority is to seek a suitable use for the church. Many different factors have to be taken into account, primarily the architectural and historical significance of the church building, and the views of parishioners, heritage bodies and other interested parties.

Mr. Prentice: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. My interest was triggered when I read Jimmy Hill's autobiography over Christmas. He reminded me that in the 1980s the freehold of Fulham football club was sold by the Church Commissioners for £900,000 to the then chairman of the club, Ernie Clay, who then sold it on for £7 million and is now living somewhere in Portugal. Since then, there has been a move away from property into equities. What is the Church of England's policy towards investing in UK equities, and specifically those companies that provide employment in deprived urban areas such as north-east Lancashire?

Mr. Bell: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's rather wide-ranging question. While he has been reading Jimmy Hill's autobiography, I have been reading that of George Hardwick, the former captain of England and Middlesbrough player whom I see regularly at my football games—although we do not talk about Church matters when we meet in the directors' room at Middlesbrough football club.

It has always been the Church's policy to offer its property for sale on the open market and to get the best price for it. That is a natural part of the Church's duties, and the funds are of course used to provide the wherewithal for the parish priests and their pensions and for the bishops' stipends. As for the policy on the sale of shares and the relationship between property and share investment, we have reduced our shares in property to something like 22 per cent. of our overall investment. The rest is involved in equity. The Church Commissioners always take into account their financial obligations and local constituencies and communities such as those of my hon. Friend.

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): On behalf of the northern region, I support the interesting idea put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice). I have not been reading autobiographies, but I have been reading the biography of Richard Nixon by

Jonathan Aitken. I do not think that the opinions of either on bishops would be highly appreciated in the Chamber at the moment.

It would be a good idea to recycle the Church's money far more beneficially than at present to generate jobs, particularly in inner-city areas. The report "Faith in the City" and a report published during the last general election did not receive the attention that they deserved. I fully support my hon. Friend's idea, and I hope that my hon. Friend the Second Church Estates Commissioner will support it too.

Mr. Bell: I plead guilty to having an autographed copy of Jonathan Aitken's book about Richard Nixon. I read not only the autograph but the book.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): It is an excellent book.

Mr. Bell: As the hon. Gentleman says, it is an excellent book.

On the more serious point that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster) raised, the Church Commissioners have a statutory obligation relating to their investments to provide the wherewithal for the clergy, for pensions and for bishops. We are unable to go beyond that statutory obligation. However, we make it clear that the commissioners should make available land for affordable housing developments in areas such as those that my right hon. Friend has in mind. In the Octavia Hill estates in central London, we provide houses and flats at modest rents.

Disestablishment (Financial Consequences)

36. **Mr. Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington, North): If he will make an assessment of the financial consequences of disestablishment of the Church of England. [65560]

Mr. Stuart Bell (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners): I have already, on another occasion, answered my hon. Friend on this question.

It would not be feasible for the Church of England or the Church Commissioners to enter into a calculation of the costs of disestablishment, since we have no instruction from the Church that the matter is being considered.

Mr. Corbyn: Many people in this country think that it is wrong to have an established Church and that it would be helpful if England followed the example of Scotland and Wales and disestablished its Church, recognising that we are a multicultural, multi-faith society and that no religion or Church should be given pre-eminence over others. Would it not be prudent for the Church Commissioners to do their sums now so that when that democratic day dawns, it will not be such a shock for them?

Mr. Bell: I have always looked on my hon. Friend as a traditionalist rather than a moderniser and I am sure that he agrees that it is incumbent on the Church to modernise itself. We may quote the Bible from time to time, and the Bible tells us, "Physician, heal thyself." The Church of England has, through its parliament, passed a national institutions measure that created an Archbishops Council. That council met on 21 January against a background of fresh figures showing a 10 per cent. rise in new ordinands in the previous year. The Church does not need to be disestablished to be modern and vibrant and to play a full role in the nation's affairs.

My hon. Friend said that this is a multi-faith, multicultural society, and that point is accepted not only by the Church of England but by the multiple faiths to which he refers.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that many people think that the greatest feature of the established Church is that its services and ministrations are available to everybody, regardless of his or her belief, even the hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) and his constituents? Will the hon. Gentleman assure the House that he and those in the hierarchy of the Church of England are not at all attracted by the idea of disestablishment?

Mr. Bell: I can confirm to the hon. Gentleman that it is not the intention of the Church of England, through the General Synod or another means, to initiate proceedings to bring about a disestablished Church. I have it in writing from the Prime Minister—I have often referred to this correspondence—that it is not the Government's intention to take the Church in that direction.

For the hon. Gentleman's benefit, I add that discussions have taken place at the request of Churches in England about establishment in the context of the search for visible unity among the Churches, but by no means all those present were pressing for loosening the Church of England's ties with the Crown and state. We do not for a moment believe that the established Church is outmoded in the multicultural, multi-faith Britain to which I have referred.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I urge the hon. Gentleman to be less conservative. There is no better time to think of disestablishing the Church than when we are devolving power to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and considering the reform of the second Chamber. Even if the Church is not yet persuaded of the merits of disestablishment, will the hon. Gentleman ask the Church Commissioners at least to give us the information to allow the House to debate whether disestablishment would be good not only for the Church, as I believe it would, but for people of all faiths and of none throughout the United Kingdom?

Mr. Bell: That may be a party political broadcast for a future leader of the Liberal party. It is interesting that the Liberal Democrats feel that disestablishment is in our interests. In a future joint Labour-Liberal manifesto, those who believe in an established Church will have to take that into account. Whether we have a debate on the subject is a matter for the usual channels. I invite the hon. Gentleman to take that route, and would be very happy to participate in such a debate.

Iraq

3.31 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. It is always very difficult for you when something appears on the tapes after your 12 o'clock meeting, but there is a statement on the tapes after 3 o'clock that there has indeed been a missile attack on the Shia and ancient city of Basra and that there have been casualties. Those who have worked in Basra, as I did in 1994, or have visited it know that it is basically an ancient, beautiful and residential city. It so happens that you have given me tonight's Adjournment debate, which is on sanctions on Iraq. Would that be a suitable moment for a statement of explanation of why we are still raining down these missiles which, whatever their destination, always seem to land up killing women and children? It is not the purpose of a Labour Government to do that.

Madam Speaker: Neither is that much of a point of order. I thought that, in answering Question 1 in Defence questions, the Secretary of State for Defence gave the House a good deal of information in relation to the situation in the Gulf. I thought that I was very fair in whom I called to ask the Secretary of State supplementary questions. In addition, I have noticed that the hon. Gentleman has been very, very successful in the ballot for Adjournment debates over the past few months, and that he has one again tonight which, as he says, is on sanctions on Iraq. It would not be wise for him to try to extend that subject.

Orders of the Day

Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

3.33 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill falls into two quite separate parts. Both apply to the United Kingdom as a whole. The first, in clause 1, is the issue of the age of consent for male homosexuals. That is a subject on which we all have our own personal views. As on previous occasions, it will be subject to a free vote. I will be voting in favour of equalising the age for male homosexuals with that of heterosexuals at 16. That is because I believe in equality before the law.

The second, separate, issue is abuse of trust. That arises from widely shared concerns about the need to protect vulnerable young people. We are dealing with the matter in this Bill because of the very strong views about the vulnerability of 16 and 17-year-olds of both sexes expressed during debates on equalising the age of consent held in the House and another place last summer. Proposals to change the age of consent brought that concern to the surface. We decided, therefore, that it was only right to deal with it when we brought the issue of age of consent before this House for a second time. I express my gratitude to my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) and other hon. Members on both sides of the House for the tenacious and constructive way in which they raised the issue.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): My right hon. Friend speaks of equality before the law; but cannot the principle of equality often give way to broader public interest considerations, such as the protection of younger people? Given the widespread concern about older men luring younger men into a life style that is not their own, will my right hon. Friend explain why he did not include safeguards in the relevant clause of the Bill that became the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, and why the safeguards are now so limited—excluding, for example, vicars and boy scout leaders? Why is he being so timid and so limited on that subject? Given the importance of the protection issue, why did he not consider it earlier?

Mr. Straw: In response to my hon. Friend's second point about not considering it earlier, I must say that we are damned if we consider everything in advance and then serve things up to this Chamber; we are also, apparently, now damned if we listen to debates and seek to respond to them. I plead guilty to the second charge.

I accept that what is before the House, with what I regard as extensive revisions on the abuse of trust, is an advance on what was before the House in summer 1998. We brought it before the House because of concerns expressed in the House and in the other place. As for whether it is extensive, I should be grateful if my hon. Friend would listen to my explanation, and I shall give way again if he asks me to. He also has every opportunity to make a speech in his own way.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): To save the House a great deal of time in later debates and

help the motion to be effective, will the Secretary of State let us know now whether it is true or not true that, since the Sutherland decision of the European Court in 1994, there have been no prosecutions for consenting homosexual activity and a limited number of prosecutions involving assault or rape? Whatever happens, could we not save a great deal of time by not bothering to debate all this, as we often do in the House, when decisions have already been taken by European courts on our behalf?

Mr. Straw: Hon. Members on each side of the Chamber will have different points of view. In 1997, there were four cautions, one prosecution and no convictions of males aged 16 and 17 for gross indecency; and five cautions, four prosecutions and two convictions of 16 and 17-year-old males for buggery. There were two cautions, nine prosecutions and seven convictions of those aged 18 and over for buggery with 16 or 17-year-olds.

I shall now deal with the issue of the European Court of Human Rights. Its concern is about equality before the law. Of course it would be open to the House, notwithstanding that court's approach, to set a different age, which could be 17 or 18, or which could be as low as 12—although I am not for a moment recommending that—the age which applies in some European countries.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby) *rose—*

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham) *rose—*

Mr. Straw: I shall give way to the hon. Gentlemen, but I should be grateful if they would allow me to make a few remarks first.

The second issue raised in the Bill is the abuse of trust. I have already made it clear that that arises from the widespread concerns that were expressed last year. Let me also make it clear that clause 1 will be committed to a Committee of the whole House, so that all hon. Members may have an opportunity to vote specifically on the age of consent, and to bring any specific propositions before the House. The remainder of the Bill will be examined upstairs in Committee and then, subject to the decisions taken upstairs, will have a Report stage in the Chamber.

Mr. Robathan: I especially want to home in on the abuse of trust measures that the Home Secretary mentioned, which I support. The last time the issue was considered by the House—brought before us by the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton)—there was a free vote, and the abuse of trust clause was defeated. What will happen this time? Will there be another free vote? I assume that, if not, it is likely to be defeated by Labour Members.

Mr. Straw: I have explained that it is a free vote as far as we are concerned; I cannot speak for Conservative Whips.

Mr. Bercow: The Home Secretary mentioned the experience of European Union countries. Given that he will obviously have taken a view on the subject, not simply on the strength of abstract principle but on the basis of an assessment of consequences, will he tell the House what assessment he has made of the impact of equalisation of ages of consent—which, it must be said, is commonplace in other European Union countries?

Mr. Straw: As I told the House a moment ago, the age of consent varies greatly from one European country to another. I shall give the House the details, if I can turn up the relevant table, which I read with great care yesterday. The age of consent ranges from 12 in Spain to 18 in Luxembourg, I think. My hon. Friend the Minister of State will correct that, if necessary.

I have seen no evidence that an equal age of consent has caused problems in any of those countries, but it must be said that the age that has been established, which ranges over that wide span of six years, often reflects considerable differences in history and family traditions. In those other European countries, there are other norms, which ensure that the kinds of conduct about which people would be extremely anxious do not, on the whole, take place. It must also said that where the age of consent is lower than 16, there are often powerful offences in respect of those, say, over 18 who seek to have sexual intercourse with those under the age of 16.

Mr. Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough): The House is listening carefully to my right hon. Friend's description of what happens in other European countries in relation to the age of consent. Does he recall the letter that he wrote to me over the summer in which he gave a firm and clear statement of Government policy—that there would be no reduction in the age of consent to 14 for homosexual acts in our country, that no legalisation of homosexual marriages would be proposed by the Government, and that there would be no legal adoption of children by homosexual couples?

Mr. Straw: I can give my hon. Friend the undertakings that he seeks in respect of each of those propositions. We have no plans whatever to introduce legislation in respect of any of them.

I should now like to make progress. I shall deal first with the age of consent. I do not want to spend too long on the background to that, as it is well known to all of us, but I should remind the House briefly of a few key points.

Most important, perhaps, is the history of the previous votes and where those left us in this House. As hon. Members will recall, an amendment was moved to the Crime and Disorder Bill last Session to equalise the age of consent at 16. On a free vote last June, the House agreed that proposal by a majority of 336 votes to 129. In supporting the proposal, the Government accepted the need to look carefully, and as a matter of priority, at the protection of vulnerable 16 and 17-year-old girls and boys. However, for the vast majority of the House, that did not detract from our firm belief that we should no longer accept the inequity represented by a differing age of consent for homosexuals and heterosexuals.

As hon. Members know, a different view was taken in another place. Now is not the time to debate the rights and wrongs of such a decision against the clear view of principle expressed in this House. That is past history for this Bill, and the constitutional relationship between the two Houses can no doubt be debated in considerable depth on future occasions. The need to secure the passage of the Crime and Disorder Bill, which implemented a number of

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our manifesto promises, meant that we had no option but to abandon the proposals in that Bill and bring them forward again this Session in a separate Bill.

That brings us to where we are today. The proposals on the age of consent are the same as those discussed last summer. They would reduce the age of consent to 16 for male homosexuals in England, Wales and Scotland, and to 17 in Northern Ireland, equalising it in each part of the Union with the relevant heterosexual age of consent that applies in that part of the Union.

As we made clear last Session, this is not a question of encouraging one life style as against another, or of encouraging young people to have sex—far from it. Instead, it is a question of equality before the law. For a large number of young people of 16 or 17, it may well be the case that they are too young to enter into a significant sexual relationship, and nothing in the Bill should be seen as an encouragement for them to do so; but many young people of that age do enter into such relationships, and where they do so on a fully consenting basis, in my personal view it is not right for the law to discriminate against those who are homosexual, although of course I respect those who take a different view.

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): Does my right hon. Friend agree that to use the term "life style" is erroneous in this case because it involves or assumes an element of choice? All the experts agree that the vast majority of people's sexual orientation does not have that element of choice, so we should stop even talking about life styles.

Mr. Straw: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I hope that he has noticed that I have not used that term.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Is it not proper for the law to have the effect of restraining activity which the majority of people regard as undesirable or unnatural? However choice may operate, the fact remains that people have the choice to maintain self-discipline.

Mr. Straw: I shall try to deal with the hon. Gentleman's point seriously. Those issues were raised extensively in the consideration of the Wolfenden report in 1957. It will be recalled that, before then, homosexual acts at any age were illegal, and buggery attracted a penalty of life imprisonment. There is no evidence that that led to fewer people engaged in homosexual acts if they were determined to be engaged in them, but it led to huge human unhappiness and great injustice. In 1967, the House and the country accepted that the law should be changed for those over the age of 21. Much more recently, in 1994, we accepted that the age of consent should be lowered to 18. I have always believed that the age should be equalised at 16, which is the age of consent for heterosexual sex.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Straw: I have already taken several interventions and should like to make progress.

The second key point is that of discrimination, which relates directly to the issue raised by the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor). Many hon. Members will be aware of the current case concerning Euan Sutherland, and the parallel case of Christopher Morris, both now before the European Court of Human Rights. Two years ago, the European Commission of Human Rights decided against the United Kingdom and in favour of the applicants. We reached an agreement with the applicants that we would give the House the opportunity to vote on this issue, and the court case was stayed pending the outcome. However, it cannot be delayed indefinitely, and the court will not permit it. Moreover, given the strong support that the House gave the measure last time round, it would not be right to wait. This is an area where our law is clearly open to challenge, and that must be rectified—*[Interruption]*—not necessarily, may I say to those who take a different view from mine, by lowering the age of consent to 16, but definitely by changing it to an equal age.

Let me now deal with abuse of trust. During the debate in the previous Session, many hon. Members expressed concern about vulnerable young people of 16 or 17—of both sexes—who might be induced into sexual relationships which they do not really want, for fear or favour of those in positions of trust over them. I stress again that that concern is not limited to protecting young boys. Girls of that age are equally, if not more, vulnerable and deserve equal protection. Protection is needed against all who might abuse their position of trust, whatever their sexuality.

The criminal law is already adequate to deal with all non-consensual sexual activity, including that with children under the age of consent. That does not mean that terrible abuses do not occur. We have all been horrified at the catalogue of abuse, both physical and sexual, which has been uncovered in recent years at children's homes and other establishments. Some of it is still coming to light. As the House knows, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health recently announced a series of reforms to prevent such abuse from occurring again. It includes the "Quality Protects" initiative and the measures announced in response to the "Children's Safeguards" review. In addition, we are changing the criminal law to make it simpler and less traumatic for vulnerable and intimidated witnesses, including children, to give evidence in court. The Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Bill currently being considered in another place contains measures to help such witnesses give their best evidence to the courts.

There remains the important issue of abuse of trust, which falls outside the area of the law of sexual abuse as such. An abuse of trust can occur when someone in a position of authority uses his or her influence or power, either deliberately or unintentionally, to enter into an ostensibly consensual sexual relationship with someone over whom he or she is in a position of authority. The type of behaviour can range from a genuine relationship to one that approaches sexual abuse.

It has long been accepted in the professions that such a relationship—even if genuine—is unacceptable, be it a teacher with a pupil or a doctor with a patient. Harsh disciplinary sanctions usually follow. Even if innocent, such behaviour fundamentally breaches the position of trust between the individuals concerned.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): I shall choose my words carefully, because I am dealing with a case that is sub judice. Will my right hon. Friend,

and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, consider giving stronger guidance to school governing bodies about their role in this question of trust?

Mr. Straw: We will indeed. If my hon. Friend will bear with me, I shall come to the proposals for codes of practice to reinforce the specific provisions in the Bill.

Following the debates in the summer, we asked an interdepartmental working group to look, as a matter of priority, at whether, in the light of the concerns that had been voiced, the disciplinary approach was sufficient or whether criminal sanctions should be introduced. The working group reported on that in the autumn, and I placed a copy of its report in the Library of the House on 25 November. The report forms the basis for the proposals in the second part of the Bill.

The working group conducted a consultation exercise over the summer, and a summary of the responses is attached to its report. The majority of respondents thought that the disciplinary route was the right one. That was influential in shaping the group's conclusions. In particular, the group recommended against any general offence of abuse of trust. It considered, however, that where the relationship of trust was particularly strong, or where the younger party was particularly vulnerable, there was a case for a criminal offence.

That, however, is only part of the action to be taken. The working group also concluded that there was a general need to strengthen codes of conduct throughout all areas where relationships of trust existed, particularly within the large number of organisations in the voluntary sector. That is as important as the proposed new criminal offence. With that in mind, the group started work on this area with a seminar involving outside organisations on 30 November.

I hope that we will have the first working draft of model principles for the construction of such codes ready to make available to Members in time for when the Bill is in Committee upstairs, on the assumption that the House will tonight vote to give it a Second Reading. That is an important issue. All organisations will have to consider carefully the various positions of trust falling within their scope and how to take effective action against any abuse of trust.

Codes will also be needed, if they do not already exist, for areas covered by the proposed criminal offence, which I shall come to in a moment, but those codes will, of course, be in addition to the criminal sanctions.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): The difficulty with relying on codes of conduct and on the sort of disciplinary measures that my right hon. Friend is discussing is that, by their very nature, such relationships will be kept secret. Unless there is protection for those who bring information to the attention of the people in charge, and unless there is also some easy way in which that information can be genuinely verified, a code of conduct will have no impact whatever. It will simply not be worth the paper it is written on.

Mr. Straw: We are also proposing clear criminal sanctions, in clauses 2, 3 and 4 of the Bill. The codes are not alternative, in every case, to criminal sanctions; they are supplementary and complementary to them. The Bill is our best effort at the moment, but, as ever, we are open to suggestions for improving the provision. I hope that they will be forthcoming in today's debate and when that part of the Bill is examined in Committee.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): I approve of the Home Secretary's way of moving forward on this issue. A mixture of legislation and codes of practice is necessary in the area of betrayal or abuse of trust.

With the same inhibitions as the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) expressed, I put it to the Home Secretary—this is not for answer today, but may be fed in—that it is not always possible to produce enough evidence for the Crown Prosecution Service to undertake a criminal prosecution when people are suspected of misbehaving. Whether in respect of a teacher, or someone who works for a voluntary organisation or a Church, it might be worth consulting on some way of setting up a register, so that people could say, in all honesty, "We believe that somebody has been suspected of something, but there is no proof."

If that happened two or three times to the same person in different areas, we would avoid, for example, the present scandal of teachers getting references when people are trying to get them out of their school and into a new school and—where a charge eventually results—the social inquiry reports not looking back to find out what happened in the other four or five schools where such a person may have abused children.

Mr. Straw: I take the hon. Gentleman's point. There is an ever-present challenge to ensure that enough evidence is available to the Crown Prosecution Service to secure a conviction, given the heavy burden of proof that exists in our criminal courts. We are trying to make it easier for witnesses to come forward, and to gain protection under the provisions of the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Bill, which is currently being considered in the other place. That said, I am sure that there will still be a number of cases in which the evidence is clear, but, for a variety of reasons, is not sufficient to secure a conviction in the criminal courts.

That, however, should not prevent those who exercise authority over the individual who is causing a breach of trust from disciplining that person. A responsibility is therefore placed on, for example, leaders of the scout movement and school governors. It is a responsibility which they must undertake: after all, there is a different and smaller burden of proof in their disciplinary processes, whether or not a prosecution is undertaken and is successful.

As for the question of records and registers, the Department for Education and Employment already has what it calls List 99, which contains details not only of people who are convicted of offences, but of others against whom school governing bodies, for example, have clear evidence. A similar list is run by the Department of Health in respect of those involved in social work with

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children, and there are also the provisions for criminal records which we shall co-ordinate as a one-stop shop in the Criminal Records Bureau.

Ms Helen Southworth (Warrington, South): Will my right hon. Friend consider the special concerns of young people with learning and other disabilities who give evidence and act as witnesses?

Mr. Straw: Yes. We have taken steps to deal with that issue, which is partly covered in the Bill that is currently in another place.

Mr. David Borrow (South Ribble): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Straw: If I may, I shall continue with my explanation of the Bill, but I will take interventions before I sit down.

As I have said, the working group concluded that a new offence was needed in circumstances in which the relationship of trust was particularly strong, or the younger party was likely to be particularly vulnerable. That relates directly to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, South (Ms Southworth). There are four main groups to be covered. As well as the—as usual—excellent detailed brief from the Library, we have provided detailed explanatory notes with the Bill, which, inevitably, set out the circumstances that we seek to cover in clearer language than the Bill itself.

First, there are young people who are held in any form of detention. They may be personally very vulnerable to undue influence, persuasion or manipulation; in addition, they have no way out of their situation, and may be frightened and friendless. Secondly, there are those who are looked after by a local authority, in a children's home, in foster care or in semi-independent accommodation. Those young people too may be vulnerable and isolated.

The third category consists of those who are resident in an institution providing health or social care: a hospital, a children's home, a nursing home or another form of residential care. Again, such young people may be very vulnerable; again, it is difficult for them to walk away from the situation. Abuse of such a position of trust should not be tolerated, and should be subject to the criminal law.

Finally, there is the area of full-time education. It is a broad category, but education epitomises what many see as the essence of the relationship of trust. Teachers are in loco parentis even when pupils are 16 or 17. That is the first reason for including full-time education as a whole. The second reason is the practical difficulty of creating separate groups within the category. Children at boarding school, like those in residential care or detention, cannot easily walk away from the situation. Because of their position, they are likely—as with the other young people whom I have mentioned—to be particularly vulnerable to undue influence.

Some children, such as those with learning difficulties, may be even more vulnerable, although they are at day schools; but I feel that it would be wholly invidious for some members of a class to be protected by the criminal law from abuse of trust, and others not to be so protected. That would be the position if we attempted a narrower definition, as classes may be of mixed ability, and many schools comprise both boarding and day pupils.

I appreciate that, just as there are some who think that the scope of the new offence is too narrow, there are others who think it too wide. Others think that areas such as residential holiday camps, scouts and guides should also be covered. Drawing the line is not easy. Of course, we are open to the views of the House and to suggestions for improvement, but we think—we do not know; we think—that we may have it right.

The principles of particular vulnerability for the individual, coupled with a particularly strong position of trust, seem to us to be the right criteria. They leave clearly defined categories of occupation where the law will apply and ensure that those covered by it will know—it is an important point—that they fall within its scope. Those outside that scope will also be covered by codes of conduct, but a more flexible approach in respect of them may be possible.

I said at the outset that there were a number of other important developments that I wanted to touch on. Those are relevant both to what is in the Bill and to what is not.

Last July, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael), the then Minister of State, announced our intention to review the law on sexual offences in England and Wales. The present law is archaic and riddled with inconsistencies and inequalities. It has grown as a patchwork of provisions, reflecting the values and policies of previous generations, when, for example, the relative positions of men and women in society was very different. It is time that we took a hard look at the law to decide how it should meet the needs of the new century.

Mr. Borrow: On that point, does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the problems with the existing legislation is that it criminalises young males below the age of consent, whereas all the other age-of-consent legislation seeks to protect young people under the age of consent, rather than criminalise them? The age-of-consent legislation, as it is now and as it will be after the Bill is passed, will still leave young gay males under the age of consent as potential criminals, which will discourage them from whistle-blowing if they are approached by older males, which seems to be a fear among many hon. Members.

Mr. Straw: I understand the point that my hon. Friend makes. It is a complex area of law. I hope that he will feel able to put in representations to the review, so that they can be considered in proper time.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: Although the Home Secretary's proposals to deal with abuse of trust are welcome—indeed, I supported the amendment that was tabled by the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton)—does he not understand that the message that he and those who will vote for the measure today are sending to the country is totally at variance with the message that the Government wish to give about the importance of the family?

Does the Home Secretary not understand that he simply cannot have it both ways? I know that the Government are keen to do that, but it is clear that the message that will go out from the House tonight if it votes for the

measure—it is opposed by 70 per cent. of the population, so the House will be out of kilter with the public—is at variance with the Government's proclaimed support for the family, which the measure seeks to undermine.

Mr. Straw: That is the hon. Gentleman's opinion. I respect it, but I do not agree with it. I do not believe that anything in the proposition that I support and which, I think, many hon. Members on both sides of the House support—an equal age of consent at 16—is antithetical to the Government's view. That view is by no means a partisan view, and it is that, without preaching about the nature of adults' personal relationships, we should take action better to support families, especially families with children.

We can have a debate about that on another occasion, but I have to give the same answer to the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) as I gave to the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne). The criminal law, when it was imposed with all its severity before 1967, did not prevent or stop homosexual acts taking place between people of any age; I know that for certain. It did discriminate against people who were of a homosexual nature, rather than a heterosexual nature, and caused untold, unnecessary and gratuitous misery to those people and, in many cases, their families as well.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury) *rose—*

Mr. Straw: With great respect, I have taken a large number of interventions and I should like to proceed.

The review that we have established will focus particularly on providing further protection for children and punishing abusers appropriately. It will look at a full range of sex offences from rape and indecent assault to indecent exposure, gross indecency, procuring and abduction. Many of the offences currently on the statute book are deeply anachronistic. I do not think that we would now consider it right that the offence of causing or encouraging prostitution of a girl under 16 can be committed only by parents and that the law cannot be used against pimps. Neither do we want to have offences that require the victim to be proved a "defective". Those are just two of the many examples of how the law is archaic.

The Sex Offenders Act 1997 is also under review. It is a recent Act, but we started a research project into its effectiveness last autumn. It is due to be completed later this year. We shall be looking carefully at the Act in the light of the study. The review will cover the list of offences and whether there should be any judicial discretion in imposing the registration requirement, particularly for juveniles. The inclusion of the new offence of abuse of trust in the list means that it will also be covered in the review.

I have today placed in the Library a copy of the report of the interdepartmental working group on preventing unsuitable people from working with children and abuse of trust. The Government welcome the report as the basis for an integrated scheme to provide greater protection for children and, in due course, vulnerable adults. Primary legislation will be required to put the new schemes in place.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon) *rose—*

Mr. Straw: I am almost at the end of my speech. Many hon. Members on both sides want to speak.

The integrated scheme envisages a central access point for three sources of information, including criminal records and List 99, which I mentioned earlier to the hon. Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley). The Protection of Children Bill currently before Parliament makes provision for the Criminal Records Bureau to be the central access point for the scheme.

The Government have embarked on a major programme to prevent sexual abuse in the home and elsewhere and to put in place safeguards and a new culture of protection of children through all areas of child care and social services. We have discussed that at length on other occasions, in particular in the context of the Government's response to the children's safeguards review.

Those are the major planks of our programme of reform; that is the context of the Bill. I believe that it is a good measure which balances the need to ensure that young people are adequately protected with the right that all citizens should have to equality before the law. I commend it to the House.

4.8 pm

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): This is the second time that we have debated the issue and the second time I have spoken, so my speech will be brief.

I welcome two aspects of the Bill. First, it starts as a Bill. Part of my criticism last time that we debated the issues was that the relevant amendment was introduced very late, preventing the House from giving it thorough scrutiny. The measure was offered on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. Now we shall be able to give proper scrutiny in Committee to all aspects of what is being proposed.

Secondly, I welcome the steps taken to recognise that children in care and under supervision need protection. Many of us have argued for that. We shall have to examine the adequacy of the protection offered. I sympathise with the point made by the hon. Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson). We shall need to consider issues such as the maximum sentence, but the measure is right in principle. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton), whose amendment brought the issue up originally.

Against that background, the question is whether the age of consent should be reduced to 16. For the Opposition, there will be a free vote on the Bill. I shall try to review some of the evidence, but I shall put forward my personal views.

In 1994, I voted for the age of consent to be reduced from 21 to 18. Eighteen is the age of majority, and it seemed to me sensible that young men should make up their own minds at that age. I do not go back on that judgment. There are some who think that that went too far, but I agreed with the Bishop of York, who said at the time that it was a sensible step and allowed the evidence to be assessed.

In coming to the subject, I am strongly and personally influenced by the campaign on AIDS that I conducted at the end of 1986 and the beginning of 1987. AIDS is not an exclusively homosexual issue, although some argue even now, wrongly, that it is. Equally, however, it is clear that it disproportionately affects the gay community. During that campaign and afterwards—when I was a member of the council of the National Aids Trust—I met

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representatives of the gay community regularly and frequently. I do not wish to be patronising in my praise, but I hope at any rate that I can be acquitted of being hostile to the gay community.

During the AIDS campaign, I learnt two major lessons. It was a unique campaign, inasmuch as we sought to involve all the public and to rely on the public. I do not believe that anything like it has been attempted in the post-war years. The first lesson that I learnt was about what the public expected of Ministers and Governments. I remember that I was urged to lead what was called a moral campaign—in other words, rather than concentrating on practical health education, I was urged to provide a moral message on what was "right" and "wrong". Frankly, I was sceptical of that advice.

I did not advocate a promiscuous life style, but equally I did not believe that the public necessarily regarded Ministers or, dare I say, Members of Parliament, as the automatic role models or moral guardians of the nation. I must admit that some of the things that have happened since 1986-87 have confirmed me in that view. Whether it is back to basics or the third way, a well-meaning message is subject to the slight problem that it can be spectacularly blown out of the water at any stage. My view was that the public wanted sensible advice rather than lectures.

Mr. Brazier: Does my right hon. Friend agree that if we were to extend his analogy a little further, the House of Commons should not have a debate on economic policy?

Sir Norman Fowler: The point I am seeking to make is that we should proceed with a certain amount of humility on moral issues. I suggest that that is not a bad lesson for any of us, however strongly we may feel about the issues. I add that the history of this century has shown that it is better for the Government and Ministers to give practical advice, rather than seek to put over a moral message without the practical advice. During the 1914-18 war, the advice to "think of King and country" in terms of sexual habits proved to be spectacularly unsuccessful.

That brings me to the second lesson that I took from the AIDS campaign. We were posting leaflets to every house and every home in Britain, so we agonised about the message—how explicit should it be, and what language should be used? I have been criticised or taken off in the press for other messages, most of which are now in folklore. It is totally untrue, but there is nothing I can do about denying it. One of my earliest advertisements was challenged by a senior Minister on the ground that the words "having sex" were not the kind of language that we should use; so we had some difficulty in getting the message across.

The public response to our leaflets was emphatic: there were next to no complaints, and we were criticised neither for the directness of the message nor for the fact that we could have been perceived as protecting the gay community. The British public took a mature and sensible attitude: they thought that we were right to warn and, by implication, they thought it wrong to leave people to their own fate as, tragically, some countries did.

That was significant, because I contend that, just as the public are sensible and mature in their attitude to an issue such as AIDS, they show equal common sense today on the age of consent. The Home Secretary is entirely right to say that the public do not want men in their 20s and 30s—let alone in their 40s and 50s—to be prosecuted for consensual sex. They regard that as a matter for personal judgment, not for the criminal law.

The public's concern comes when the age for consent comes nearer and nearer to what they regard as childhood. In 1994, a Gallup poll suggested that 71 per cent. supported the status quo for the age of consent at 21. Interestingly, when NOP divided the question and gave a choice between 18 and 16, the majority—48 per cent. as against 44 per cent.—favoured 18; but, significantly for this debate, only 13 per cent. favoured 16.

That opposition to going this further stage, from 18—which we introduced only in 1994—to 16, has remained in the opinion polls. At the end of 1997, one poll showed 53 per cent. opposed to lowering the age of consent and 35 per cent. in favour. Perhaps the most interesting of the later polls was the Gallup poll last August, which was taken after the House had voted to lower the age of consent to 16 and the House of Lords had voted the other way. When the public were asked whether they personally thought that the age of consent for homosexual men should be 16 or 18, 26 per cent. said 16 and 65 per cent. said 18.

I do not believe that there is any evidence to suggest that public opinion is unreasonable on the age of consent or that those surveys show an inherent prejudice against the gay community. Many of the public who are polled are parents and are concerned about the impact that a change in the law could have on 16 and 17-year-olds.

The House would do well to take note of the public view. If I am right, and two thirds of the country are against lowering the age of consent, we should take note of that and consider some of the reasons that are advanced. Some, like the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Mr. Bell), will argue, as he did in our previous debate on the subject, that there is a particular need in our culture to support young people. He said:

> "Pressures are at work to legitimise any and every life style, irrespective of any difference of value and quality between them. The Church believes that those pressures should be resisted."—[*Official Report*, 22 June 1998; Vol. 314, c. 795.]

Others will agree with the Lord Bishop of Winchester, who spoke for many other religious leaders when he warned against undermining the position of marriage in our society. Above all, my view is that the public generally feel that we have a responsibility to do everything in our power to prevent young people from being affected by harm or abuse. Indeed, the Government have obviously accepted that principle, as it is the reason for the second part of the Bill. We can debate whether the protection is adequate, but the Government have accepted the principle of seeking to protect.

Sir Peter Lloyd (Fareham): On the question of protection, does my right hon. Friend agree that the present law is very successful in deterring homosexually inclined and active 16 and 17-year-olds from obtaining medical and moral advice?

Sir Norman Fowler: I do not agree with that. My experience with the AIDS campaign was that we were able to succeed in making advice available to people using drugs and to the great many more who were committing

criminal offences. Although I know my right hon. Friend's views and respect them, I do not think that his argument is valid. Even if it were, it would have to be balanced against the greater public good.

Mr. Bercow: The opinion poll evidence invoked by my right hon. Friend is important. The House should listen to it, but not be slavishly bound by it. My right hon. Friend said that he would offer us his personal view: will he say to what adverse consequences he fears that equalisation at the age of 16 would lead?

Sir Norman Fowler: I shall come to that point in the second part of my remarks. However, I question what my hon. Friend says about public opinion. I think that we should listen to it, as it is important to take public opinion on this matter into account.

Mr. Bercow: I said that we should not be slavish in our response to it.

Sir Norman Fowler: What that normally means is, "I'll listen to it, and then I'll ignore it." I think that public opinion on this matter is so pronounced that the House would be well advised to listen to what is being said.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): The right hon. Gentleman told the right hon. Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd) that he did not believe that young people of 16 would be disinclined to seek medical advice. If he were shown to be wrong about that, would he change his mind?

Sir Norman Fowler: I would not so much change my mind as try to change the response of young people. If they were shown to be disinclined to seek such advice, that would be a problem which we should examine and try to resolve. However, whether that amounts to an argument for going as far as reducing the age of consent for everyone to 16 is another question.

I believe that, in respect of the Bill, many people will feel that many more children than those under supervision are in danger and at risk. Will reducing the age of consent make their position more perilous and increase the risk that they face? That is the question which the House must consider. In making that judgment, we must assess the size of the threat.

It is obviously extremely difficult to evaluate the risk of sexual abuse, but an indication of the scale of the problem can be found in the study edited by Donald West of the Cambridge Institute of Criminology. That study drew attention to one piece of research, in which it was found that 12 per cent. of women and 8 per cent. of men reported that they had been sexually abused as children. If accurate, that research means that we are talking about several million adults who have been sexually abused.

Even those who contest those figures would not deny that sexual abuse poses a massive threat. It is not surprising that many parents are worried about what is an inherent fear for them, nor that they feel that the problem could or would be made worse by lowering the age of consent. In that connection, it is worth recalling the words of Sir William Utting, who was quoted in our previous debate and whose advice lay behind the amendment tabled then by the hon. Member for Bassetlaw. In his 1997 Department of Health report, Sir William said of sexual offenders:

> "Persistent sexual abusers are a scourge of childhood. Their numbers are difficult to estimate but each one who adopts a lifetime career will amass hundreds of victims. They inflict unspeakable psychological and physical harm. Some of their victims will become abusers. Their success depends on their ability to ingratiate themselves with adults and children . . . They establish themselves as trusted friends, colleagues or employees. Exposure may be a matter of chance, often after many years of abuse."

Mr. Borrow: I assume that the right hon. Gentleman's points about child abuse relate to abuse under the age of 16. He argues that a reduction in the age of consent for gay men from 18 to 16 would increase the risk of such abuse. If that is the case, given the figures that he gave, which show that, nationally, more women than men have been abused as children, does he advocate that the age of consent for heterosexual men and women should be increased from 16 to give them more protection from child abuse?

Sir Norman Fowler: No, I do not. That is an issue, but I am arguing that the position should not be made worse. I heard the hon. Gentleman's earlier intervention and he seemed to be arguing for changes that go beyond the Bill—far beyond it. It is all very well arguing such a case, but I am arguing that the position should not be made worse, nor the risk greater. It is a matter of judgment for the House and for the hon. Gentleman—whom I suspect does not exactly share my view on the subject—how seriously one estimates that risk. I happen to consider it serious. I was Secretary of State for Social Services for six years, so I recognise the problem. I feel that it is a serious risk and a serious issue, but I am speaking personally.

Yvette Cooper (Pontefract and Castleford) *rose—*

Sir Norman Fowler: I will continue for the moment.

Bill Utting's report was about children living away from home, but his description of the threat has a wider application. We must remember that those who have been found guilty of sexual abuse have usually had a long career as abusers. As the Home Secretary may remember, in our previous debate on the subject I gave the example of the self-styled Bishop Gleaves. He may remember it because I also raised the issue in 1975 when I was last at the shadow Dispatch Box to speak on home affairs and he was adviser to the Secretary of State for Social Services.

Bishop Gleaves was convicted of offences against young people in the 1970s. I raised his case in 1975 and he was convicted last year of further offences and sentenced to 15 years in prison. My point is that he is a lifetime offender, like so many others. It is worth remembering that that is the context of this legislation.

I heard what the Home Secretary said and I certainly agree with him about reviewing the law. However, it is not merely a question of reviewing the law, but of reviewing the adequacy of the treatment of such offenders once they have been sentenced. We need to take into account our lack of success and, at times, the inadequacy of our efforts to change people's habits once they go into prison. The issue does not end at the sentence; in a sense, it begins after sentencing. Too often, we have no realistic

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hope of sexual offenders changing their ways after they come out of prison. All too often, those hopes fail to be realised, as in the case of Bishop Gleaves.

Mr. Straw: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman about the twin need to ensure that the offences are in order and that there is better punishment, detention and treatment of offenders. For that reason, as he may know, we are working actively on proposals, which I shall bring before the House shortly, for dealing better with offenders with dangerous personality disorders.

Sir Norman Fowler: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, and I hope that he will bring the proposals before us shortly because it is a fundamental issue. While we repeatedly debate changes in the law, little appears to happen, which negates all our law-making efforts.

I understand and respect the arguments of those who say that the age of consent should be lowered to 16 and that it is a matter of rights for young people. I hope that such people will recognise that it is not a question only of rights but of responsibilities, and in particular of the responsibility that we owe young people not to worsen their position in respect of the risk of abuse. No one can doubt public concern on the issue; nor should we attempt to do so. I believe that the majority of the public would prefer this change not to be made. We should listen to the public and not move to reduce further the age of consent.

4.31 pm

Mr. Joe Ashton (Bassetlaw): I thank my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary for introducing this Bill, which I welcome and support. He and the Minister of State have done a magnificent job in listening to Back Benchers and the mood of the House, which was perhaps misunderstood last June. It was the end of the Session and we were trying to do too much, too soon. Now that we have had a another look at the matter, I am sure that the Bill will get a massive majority tonight.

That is a commonsense issue. The matter has been going on for a couple of years or more. As I had to remind Baroness Young on a television programme today, the European Court of Human Rights said that equality between men and women in respect of gay rights legislation was essential and that it would enforce it if the British Government did not introduce legislation. That seems to have been forgotten.

There was never really an anti-gay row about the matter. I voted willingly for the measure that was tacked on to the Crime and Disorder Bill last June. However, the House and Back Benchers resent it when they think that a Committee has not had a chance to study an issue, table amendments and let things take their proper course through the House. A lot of friction lingered after the age of consent was reduced to 18 under Edwina Currie's proposal. There was a three-hour debate without time to examine the issues at leisure. I welcome what the Home Secretary has done.

The Home Secretary will remember that the consent measure had a majority of 207 last June. When the question on my amendment was put, the majority fell to 40. Sad to say, the free vote was taken off. If it had been on, the amendment would have been carried and there would have been even more chaos and mishaps in the Lords. When the measure has been carefully considered in Committee, there will be no reason for the House of Lords to reject it, although one or two may try it on. Many Labour Lords who voted then—a lot of colleagues my age and old trade unionists—were unhappy about what was being done. If the measure goes through as a separate Bill including my amendments, there will be much less resistance in the Lords. I hope that the Lords will also realise that, if it is not passed by Parliament, the European Court will say that we are out of order and impose it one way or another.

I am happy to say that it all started with a written question, which I tabled, about equality in other countries, to which I shall return later. The idea of a position of authority, influence or trust seems to have been reduced in the Bill to trust alone. I will come to that also.

The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) has outlined the extent of the problem and I do not want us to repeat the debate that we had last June. The Utting report told us that 200,000 children under the age of 18 were living in children's homes, foster care and boarding schools, with 1,700 in Prison Service establishments, 110,000 in boarding schools and 35,000 in foster care.

After public uproar, Esther Rantzen set up a child abuse helpline which thousands of kids called because they had no one to turn to. However, many children could not even afford the cost of the call, until the BBC fixed up a free phone line. The right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), when he was still Prime Minister, set up the Utting inquiry, but, unfortunately, it reported just after the general election when everything was in turmoil and the media were preoccupied with the post-election euphoria. The report never received the analysis it merited—indeed, it was not even debated in Parliament until my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health made a statement on the subject.

Parliament was in danger of allowing a major social cause of public concern to go unanswered. I felt like people must have felt in the days of "Oliver Twist" or Dr. Barnardo: here we were debating every subject under the sun, while rent boys and young prostitutes were on the streets, having been shoved out there through no fault of their own. I am glad that the House is now studying a social problem on a non-partisan basis and that, as it does when at its best, it will eventually come to a conclusion that is mutually acceptable to Parliament and the public. I am sure that my friends on both sides of the House are also happy to be a part of that.

Dr. Harris: I should like to raise with the hon. Gentleman a point that I was unable to raise with the Home Secretary, although I should still be interested to hear the Home Secretary's view. Last year, the hon. Gentleman was careful to introduce his amendment in a non-discriminatory way; he was at pains to point that out and we respected that. Does he feel entirely comfortable with the current provision, whereby heterosexuals accused of abuse of trust will have a get-out through marriage, which is legal for 16 to 18-year-olds with parental permission, whereas that course of action is not open to homosexuals? Can the hon. Gentleman suggest any means of resolving that continued discrimination? I understood that the Government were keen to introduce a

non-discriminatory provision along the lines of the hon. Gentleman's amendment last year, but, so far, they do not appear to have done so.

Mr. Ashton: My personal view is that marriage is a partnership: neither partner is in a position of supervision or trust in respect of the other. I have often wondered why homosexuals do not draw up a contract to cover long-standing partnerships, enabling them to leave pension rights to a partner, or even to obtain a spouse's travel warrant to the House of Commons. I would have no objection to such arrangements.

However, to answer the hon. Gentleman's question, I believe that the public would insist on there being some form of written contract that would stand up in law. If the framework for such contracts were to be put before Parliament, I believe that the majority of Members and of the public would find it acceptable. The public will not regard mere mutual friendships, which can end without recourse to the courts, as being equal to marriage. The possibility of marriage is a separate issue, which can be dealt with in the Standing Committee, of which the hon. Gentleman might be a member.

I should like to thank some of the newspapers. Although we often criticise them, there is no doubt that, in respect of major social problems such as child abuse, the newspapers have the feel of the public and they know the causes of public protest. I have saved many cuttings since our debate last year. They include a story in the *Yorkshire Post* with the headline, "Pervert teacher preyed on children for 16 years", which describes how a teacher in Leeds raped a 12-year-old girl in a cupboard and terrorised his victims into not reporting him. Referring to the "epidemic in our midst", *The Guardian* named paedophiles, published photographs of them and described the crimes "that went unnoticed". The newspaper told of events at Greystone Heath, the approved school for boys in Warrington, saying:

"a 21-year-old student teacher . . . went to work there. Over the ensuing four years, he raped . . . 16 boys".

Other members of staff there included

"Alan Langshaw who raped . . . 24 boys; Dennis Grain who raped . . . 18; Roy Shuttleworth who raped . . . 10; Jack Bennett who indecently assaulted two".

The Guardian described how they "fanned out" and went to other institutions, including a Catholic boys' home, and other areas, such as north Wales. I give credit to the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express* and every other newspaper that has spent a great deal of time and effort exposing what has happened. An article entitled "Innocents on our streets of shame" dealt with children lured on to the streets by vice gangs. We should be reminded time and again of what is going on. The newspapers are not perverting public opinion but responding to it, and we have to respond as well.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman is saying. Does he agree that one of the changes that will be greatly welcomed when it is finally implemented is that it will be an offence of child abuse for an adult to buy sex with someone under the age of 16? At the moment, people who buy sex from youngsters, often children, get treated much more leniently in the courts than they should be.

Mr. Ashton: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point, which I was going to come to later in response to what my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said about another Bill, perhaps in the next Session of Parliament, on sexual offences. It is not possible to put everything in this Bill; if we were to try to do so, it would take six months to get it through. The hon. Gentleman is right, as was the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield. According to figures that he gave, 8 per cent. of men had suffered sexual abuse as a child, and I think that he said that the figure for women was 12 per cent. According to *The Guardian*, the figure for women was 20 per cent., revealing that abuse of women as children was far more prevalent.

People who did not know where to turn go to court when they are 25 or 30 years old and, quite rightly, receive massive damages, which the councils have to pay. The crux of the matter is that, when abuse has been discovered, it has been covered up. That has been the case with teachers. Teachers have told me that they are not happy with the Bill, which they regard as a sledgehammer to crack a nut. They say that the number of teachers involved is very small—certainly only a few get caught and are prosecuted.

As the Utting report showed repeatedly, schools, teachers governors and councils do not want the bad publicity. Cases have been covered up. In the *Evening Standard*, there was, quite rightly, a big row about Islington council and the extent of child abuse there. It was hushed up, not for political reasons but because of demands by staff and headmasters who do not want other parents to take their children from the school. They do not want parents storming down to the school, protesting and telling teachers that they are not doing their job. That has gone on for years.

Mr. Paul Stinchcombe (Wellingborough): Does my hon. Friend share with me the concern felt by many that insurance companies effectively compel local authorities to keep their information hidden lest they lose their insurance cover?

Mr. Ashton: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. About eight years ago, I was a member of the Select Committee on Home Affairs. We undertook an inquiry into criminal injuries compensation legislation. We considered various cases, one of which involved a man who had sodomised his wife and stepson, for which he had gone to prison. He was beaten up by other prisoners and then put in a claim for criminal injuries. The claim was of course kicked out because he was not entitled to compensation.

In the Select Committee, I asked who had claimed for the boy. There was no answer, only a deadly silence. No one had claimed for him—no councils were claiming for abused children. However, the case started an avalanche of claims. If I remember rightly, the insurance company Municipal Mutual ran into serious difficulties as a result. It put a great deal of pressure on local councils to get rid of the offenders and not to take them to court, because that would have saved them a lot of money.

List 99 was supposedly a blacklist of teachers who had been sacked. I understood that there were about 100 teachers on that list. I am grateful to the *Daily Mail*, which—again since the previous debate on this matter—printed an analysis of a survey by the BBC2 education programme, "Just One Chance". That survey found that 39 authorities were keeping blacklists, and that more than

[Mr. Ashton]

1,000 teachers had been sacked who had never been placed on List 99. They were suspected, but never convicted, of abusing children and were still working freely in schools. They appeared on the informal blacklist, but that information was not passed on. The Association of Chief Education Officers says that the rules operated by the Government's official central register, List 99, are too tight because it effectively contains only those people who have been convicted in a court.

There was obviously a conspiracy of silence. Paedophiles have a network. One can gain access to that on the internet and buy child pornography. They move around the country from the care of one education authority to that of another and start their practices all over again.

The situation has reached the stage where, for some local councils, the most important consideration is not looking after the poor abused child but keeping quiet and not blowing the whistle. Anybody who blows the whistle is ostracised. The average county council or borough council discipline code for employees who have to be sacked or suspended—they can be suspended for six or nine months on full pay—consists of about 200 pages of procedures that must be followed. The union can provide a defence. The whistleblower is hauled up before the inquiry committee and may change his evidence because he is put under pressure. At the end of all that, everybody says of the alleged abuser, "For God's sake, let's get rid of him and move him on." He moves on to abuse again.

We should be grateful to newspapers for highlighting those matters. Detective Chief Inspector Gould of Avon and Somerset police warned about children at risk on foreign exchange trips. He had uncovered 500 cases of abuse and neglect involving children sent on trips by schools and firms. He said that

> "English children . . . have unwittingly been placed by their school with known paedophiles in Spain, France and Canada."

Of course people should be responsible for that. We should know which schools have not made checks.

I said that I welcomed the Bill, but I have a couple of doubts. I do not blame my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary for those doubts, which relate not to a loophole but to a serious social problem.

Parents have rights too. I have received a lot of criticism from the National Association of Head Teachers saying that head teachers are being put under a great deal of pressure, but the response from parents has been overwhelming. I have also received letters from women aged over 40 who said that when they were 16—above the age of consent—they fell in love with their music teacher. They had wanted to be professional musicians and had a close relationship with their teacher, but they bitterly regretted that. When their parents complained to the school, the response was that the girl was 16 and the school could do nothing.

Men wrote saying that they had wanted to get into the football team. They knew that what their teacher was doing was against the rules but they had badly wanted to get into the team because they had wanted to be a professional footballer. I shall not reveal names or addresses, but those letters were cries from the heart. Many people, who were over the age of consent, suffered an emotional trauma.

I mentioned two loopholes to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. People have asked about cases involving 16-year-olds at work, whose boss is on to them. They do not want to lose their job and they are frightened of being made redundant or not being promoted. I understand that the Bill does not cover 16 and 17-year-olds at work who are being harassed because they can generally go home and tell their mother and father. They have somebody to go to, to lean on, whereas a youngster in a boarding school or a young offenders institution, or who lives with a foster parent, has not. That is why such youngsters have to seek help from Childline, which was set up by Esther Rantzen.

I am happy with what my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has done with regard to work, but there is another category of youngsters who are terribly abused: those who are put on the streets by pimps. Such people run away from care or a foster parent because of abuse, and find a friendly face on the street who, in two or three days, has them on drugs and selling themselves.

I know that we do not want to make the Bill so big that it covers every sexual offence. My original amendment concerned authority, supervision and trust. I think that a pimp who puts a young woman on the game, as it is called, by supplying her with drugs has authority over her. I hope that, in Committee, we can alter the Bill to include authority, especially concerning those who give drugs to a 16 or 17-year-old in order to make some financial gain.

I happen to live about half a mile from where the Yorkshire Ripper was caught. The area goes up and down, but I will not go into details. A woman who lives quite near there wrote to me, and every other Member of Parliament who represents a Sheffield constituency, about her daughter. Mrs. Irene Iveson is a constituent of the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan), whom I will chide in a minute. Mrs. Iveson's daughter, Fiona, was enticed away from her middle-class family at the age of 16 by a pimp, who put her on drugs. She was totally under his control. He put her on the streets, where she was murdered by a client. On what grounds can the pimp be charged, bearing in mind that the girl was 16? I think that he was charged with some minor offence and bound over. Mrs. Iveson rightly says that there should be legislation to prevent such events. Fiona would never have been murdered if that man had not put her on drugs at the age of 16 and put her on the streets.

The hon. Member for Hallam took up the case. *The Star* in Sheffield reported him saying that he was the only person who had done anything about the matter, that the Prime Minister had done nothing. Two weeks after speaking and voting against the amendments that I tabled, he was out saying that the Liberals are the only ones who care.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): I shall respond briefly to the hon. Gentleman's direct challenge. I have tremendous respect for the spirit of what he is attempting to do, but felt—I thought that I had made it clear in my speech, which I shall check—that the wording of his amendment was rather all-encompassing. I know that he has a different view about driving parliamentary draftsmen to do something. I tabled amendments specifically on the offence of pimping, and will continue to support the call for the

creation of specific offences. I felt that his amendments were too general and that it was a problem that they did not distinguish between pimps and other people.

Mr. Ashton: We are always ready to welcome a sinner who has repented. I accept the hon. Gentleman's apologies. I very much welcome the fact that he will join us in the Lobby. Perhaps we can discuss that matter, and the question of whistleblowers, in Committee.

I welcome the Bill. It will become major and important legislation. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is due great credit for introducing it.

4.53 pm

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): I am glad to follow the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton), even though he chided my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan) inaccurately. I respect the hon. Gentleman for moving forward the discussion and opening up a relevant area of debate as a Back Bencher. I commend him, even if he thinks that that is too dangerously like Lib-Lab co-operation. I shall move on because I know that he is not very keen on that sort of thing.

For Liberal Democrats, this a free-vote issue. Our party manifesto supported equalisation of the law, while reserving the right of Members of Parliament to dissent in a free vote. We welcome the fact that the Government have given the House an opportunity to consider protection for young people of either sex from abuse of a position of trust, whether of a heterosexual or homosexual nature. Many of us supported the amendments of the hon. Member for Bassetlaw, although they also concerned a free-vote issue. We shall all need to consider the relevant clauses in detail—but, first, let us consider the main issue.

There is a very wide range of opinions on homosexuality. Although there appear to have been some shifts of opinion in recent years, it still ranges from those who regard homosexual activity as morally repugnant to those who wish to affirm homosexuality as a commendable life style. Some people are disapproving but tolerant, whereas many others seek a society in which people of different sexual orientation can quietly go about their lives without its being an issue.

My view is that the present discriminatory law cannot be justified from any of those standpoints, and that it has harmful consequences. Moral disapproval on the part of some people, however strongly held, does not provide grounds for making private acts into criminal offences. Of course, if there is no consent, or if a position of trust has been abused, or if one of those involved is too young to be presumed able to give informed consent, the protection of the criminal law may be needed, and other parts of the Bill make that possible; but I do not think that a person over 16 who is allowed to marry and required to pay taxes can be presumed to be too young to give consent. If they are to be so presumed, it follows that heterosexual activity at 16 and homosexual acts involving 16-year-old girls should be subject to identical protection—and the House has consistently decided against that course of action.

Many of us who are worried about premature sexual activity by teenagers and its consequences for health have to recognise that turning teenagers into criminals does not help. If someone needs to seek medical advice about HIV or AIDS, or needs guidance at a time of emotional turmoil, having to admit to a criminal offence can be a powerful deterrent to getting the help that they need.

I welcome the inclusion of provisions about abuse of trust, whether heterosexual or homosexual conduct, not least because so much evidence is coming to light of systematic abuse of young people by adults in such positions, but hon. Members in all parts of the House will want to be sure that those clauses have the right scope.

There is, rightly, an emphasis on protection for young people in residential institutions; but, beyond that boundary, where should the lines be drawn? Does it make sense to include teachers in day schools but not people who supervise young people at work, or who supervise them in the activities of youth organisations, some of which are residential? Doctors are not included, presumably because they are subject to medical disciplinary procedures. Some of my hon. Friends share the view of teaching organisations that a strong General Teaching Council—which we advocate in any case—should be the body to discipline teachers in a similar way for such breaches of professional conduct. Either way, I believe that something must be done. As the hon. Member for Bassetlaw said, the practice in schools has sometimes been to get rid of abusers as quickly and quietly as possible, by giving them an ultimatum accompanied by a good reference, thereby passing the problem on to another school, but there is scope for considerable argument about how some professions should be dealt with.

Mr. Rowe: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that many of the people who, in middle age, become systematic and vicious abusers start out, as young people, with a much less developed criminality, and that, if it were made easier to intervene effectively earlier, there would be a much better chance that they could be diverted? Does he agree that the idea that it is kind to a professional colleague to allow them to slide discreetly into another job is very misguided as well as, later, potentially very dangerous?

Mr. Beith: The hon. Gentleman may have a point. I should like to reflect on it, because I am not sure whether objective evidence shows that patterns of behaviour have limited incidence in earlier years and greater incidence in later years. However, I rest on the argument that something needs to be done for the sake of victims of abuse. Early intervention may well be desirable, even from the abuser's standpoint, as I believe is the case in other respects.

There are other areas in which there is not equality before the law for male homosexuals. The review of the Sex Offenders Act 1997 will need to consider some of those areas. For example, as my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) has often pointed out in debates, private consensual sexual acts involving more than two people do not constitute a criminal offence if the conduct is heterosexual or if all the persons are female, but they do if all the persons are male. That matter is the subject of an application to the European Court of Human Rights, so we shall have to give it further attention.

The sex offenders register is another area of concern. I hope that the Home Secretary will reflect carefully on the issues. The names of all offenders under the Bill will be put on the register. I shall cite two possible cases that raise concerns.

[Mr. Beith]

First, a man who was put on the register because he had a single consensual sexual relationship when he was 17, before the enactment of the Bill, will remain on the register even though that action would no longer be an offence. I do not think that that is reasonable. Describing to me the review that is taking place, the Home Secretary stated in a letter:

"I should make clear that none of the changes which may be brought forward"—

that is, following the review—

"will be retrospective, and we do not propose any retrospective changes to the scope of the register in respect of equalisation of the age of consent."

Not many members of the general public would regard it as reasonable for someone in the limited circumstances that I described to remain on the sex offenders register, which is designed to deal with case such as those to which the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) referred, involving a repeat offender and a strong possibility of further offences. Names should not be left on the register as a result of a single offence that is no longer an offence.

Secondly, it is questionable whether a 22-year-old teacher, who on one occasion formed a relationship with a 17-year-old pupil, which might even have led to marriage, should be on the sex offenders register. It may have been right for the teacher to lose his job and suffer some penalty, but the purpose of the register is to reduce the risks from potential repeat offenders, which such a person would not be.

Even after the Bill is passed, the law relating to sexual offences will still be beset with anomalies and anachronisms. However, if it is passed, an unjustified element of discrimination will be removed; the role of the criminal law will be more precisely limited to what it can usefully and properly do, rather than serving as a statement of some people's moral convictions, which not everyone shares; and the protection of young people against abuse of positions of trust for sexual purposes of any kind will be significantly strengthened.

5.2 pm

Ann Keen (Brentford and Isleworth): Much has been said about this issue in the House over the years, and the House has had many opportunities to debate the age of consent. I am particularly pleased that many hon. Members, across all parties, supported my amendment last June, although I was disappointed and concerned that it did not become law. I am extremely pleased that the Government have returned to the issue in a Government Bill, and that it is so strongly supported by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary.

Many, many young gay men and women look to Parliament to make it possible for them to be accepted and respected in our society. There continues to be so much damage to our young people. Persecution, discrimination and prejudice still exist. Today, we have another opportunity to end that and to show that we value all our young people.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is to be commended on all her work. The Good Friday agreement covers many areas, including not only political and religious elements, but sexual orientation. It is an excellent example of the new thinking that is needed to embrace all the people and end discrimination against any of our people, wherever they live.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) introduced provisions relating to the abuse of trust, and I am pleased to participate in the debate tonight on the abuse of trust of young people. I want to make it quite plain, however, that I consider the age of consent to be a separate issue from that of the abuse of trust of young people in care. In previous debates, it was suggested that those who believe in an equal age of consent do not have at heart the well-being of our young people. I find that offensive.

Until recently, I was a member of the Select Committee on Health and contributed to a report on the migration of our young people who were sent out to Australia and New Zealand in the 1950s and 1960s, and the treatment that they received. Sadly, those young people are now gravely damaged adults, having experienced abuse by the religious organisations to which they were sent, such as the Christian Brothers. Their lives and futures have been seriously blighted as a result.

Mr. Bradshaw: Does my hon. Friend join me in welcoming the incredibly enlightened remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) on the desirability of registering partnerships? Does she share my hope that the Home Secretary will take note of that?

Ann Keen: I am sure that all hon. Members will have noted those remarks.

I was dealing with the issue of trust. I am extremely pleased that young women have been mentioned. When this matter was debated previously, many members of the other place argued that it was unnecessary to protect young women because they dealt with abuse much better than young men. Many female Members of Parliament, and many more of our constituents, were greatly offended by that suggestion.

For that reason and many others, a different approach must be taken in relation to the age of consent. It is a key issue. Young people and many experienced organisations that work with them, including the British Medical Association, the Royal College of Nursing, Barnados, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, counselling groups, social workers, the Terence Higgins trust, HIV and AIDS workers, all say that an equal age of consent is crucial if young people are to be protected and valued. Young people need to grow emotionally; they need self-esteem; and they need a youth that they can talk about. The message that the House can send out today is that all young people are to be valued.

Some people suggest that the involvement and enforcement of the law can discourage young people from being gay. Do they seriously suggest that close family members and friends should report young people to the police? If a son informs his mother about his sexuality, should she tell him in an emotional way, "Of course, this will all end with criminal action, because that is what is best for you"? No one who seriously cares about young people would do that. Advice and support should never be denied to a young person.

Much has been said about young gay men that has been offensive to those concerned, but also to their parents, many of whom have contacted me to say so. Many more

will continue to do so until we put the matter to rest. What sort of love for one's child is it when one calls for the law to be enforced more vigorously? If we go down that route, the message is that bullying at school, homophobia, beatings and persecution are the right way. Mothers and head teachers—and, sadly, the number of recorded suicides—tell us differently. Real love, care and concern mean ensuring that young people are not criminalised for their sexuality.

I have already mentioned health protection. The White Paper, "Our Healthier Nation", deals with that issue. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler), who is not in his place, was involved in bringing AIDS and HIV to people's attention, and much good work was done. He said that it was difficult to communicate on sexuality and to get the message across. How much more difficult it is to get that message across when some young people—young gay men—are criminalised. The right hon. Gentleman mentioned public concern and said that public opinion was against the age of consent being reduced to 16. I would ask him to look more carefully at that opinion poll rating, because it says what most parents would say: 16 is too young for their children to have sex, whether heterosexual or homosexual sex.

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): Does my hon. Friend agree that reducing the age of consent to 16 for homosexual acts would be a crucial consolidating measure—which would bring heterosexual and homosexual acts together, give credibility to the age of consent and reinforce it at 16 for homosexuality and heterosexuality—and a crucial child protection measure?

Ann Keen: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, because he is right; that is exactly what would be enforced.

For the first time, the extent of abuse against young people is being recognised by head teachers, education departments and school nurses, and the excellent document produced by Stonewall shows the extent of bullying in schools. The law as it stands is unworkable; the police have a difficult job in dealing with unrest in our society, and they believe that the law as it stands is a hindrance to the important work that they are doing to combat homophobic violence.

With this extended Bill and the extended time that the House has been given for debate, and as our Government are introducing much-needed measures to protect young people in all aspects of life, let us please send from this House the message that tolerance, fairness and protection are what we are about. I hope that, this time, the Bill will become law.

5.12 pm

Mr. Shaun Woodward (Witney): Hon. Members may be aware of a statue, which was put up last year near the Strand, dedicated to Oscar Wilde. It is a sad and sobering statue, but, like much good and great art, it is provocative. Looking at that statue, I see a face of misery, and perhaps other things about the way in which we, as a society, have behaved. I see what we, as a society, did to an individual, and have continued to do through much of this century. Our society has, I believe, been intolerant and hypocritical and has perpetuated the belief that the behaviour of people such as Oscar Wilde was unnatural, wrong and, by our statutes, criminal.

Mr. Robathan: I am not an expert on Oscar Wilde, but I understand that it is well documented that he went to north Africa with a friend, where they spent some time in the company of unfortunate children—boys, who were acting as prostitutes—whom they bought. I hope that every hon. Member would condemn that. Does my hon. Friend not agree that we should not make too much of Oscar Wilde's virtues?

Mr. Woodward: My hon. Friend makes an interesting intervention, but one which I fear only trivialises the issue that we are trying to address—not because of the particular actions of which he speaks, although I have no evidence and know nothing about the matter to which he refers, but because we are discussing how we wish to behave in future. That is crucial.

There have been improvements in this century. The Wolfenden report, for example, was an important new chapter in the story of our progress towards behaving as a more civilised and more tolerant society. That chapter continued with our vote in 1994, and today's debate is one more chapter in what started as a sad and miserable story for our country. It is also a chapter that owes no small debt to last year's amendment to the Crime and Disorder Bill, tabled by the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ann Keen). It was a brave and important amendment, and, like a number of other people, I am only sorry that it was lost in another place.

I should register an interest: I am a director and former deputy chairman of Childline, the charity set up to help children in trouble or danger, which has worked with young people. As the subject has been referred to a number of times in another place, I should also register my interest as an Anglican. It may be the province of some Anglicans to speak against the amended legislation this evening, but many people who believe in God also believe that perpetuating the law as it stands is a profoundly unchristian and unloving action.

All hon. Members should recognise at the outset that amendment of the law is now overwhelmingly supported by organisations that are specifically concerned with protecting children and young people. Those organisations are not pressure groups; many, such as Childline, are simply there to listen, and the role that they play in listening is crucial. Evidence from the young people who have telephoned Childline paints a sad picture—a picture of misery, fear and bullying, which is perpetuated by the stand of the current legislation.

A tragic fact of which many hon. Members will be unaware is that young people trying to come to terms with their sexual identity often become desperate. Not only do they feel that they are not part of the mainstream; they feel that they are ostracised from society. As a result, they are compelled to disguise their feelings, and, far from supporting them, we force them into isolation. Their hiding place is the repository of fear and worry.

We set such young people apart. We do not help them with the current legislation; we hurt them. Any attempt to engage in a relationship with someone of the same sex faces them with a terrifying dilemma, in that what they are doing is committing a criminal offence. That fear cannot

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possibly breed any desire for a loving relationship with another individual. It is a wholly destructive force, but it will continue for as long as the present legislation exists.

It is not surprising that Childline has evidence from a number of young people who, as a result of that dilemma, have tried to take their own lives. Sexual identity is a significant factor in suicides and attempted suicides, especially in the case of young men, and our current legislation must bear a heavy responsibility for perpetuating such desperate feelings.

Over the past 200 years, Parliament has debated a number of moral issues, the crucial question being whether something is right or wrong. Those issues have tested our humanity, and our sense of Britain as a civilised and civilising nation. We have discussed the abolition of slavery, universal suffrage, votes for women, civil rights and racial discrimination. In every instance, there has come a moment at which Parliament has been the focus of a great national debate.

Those arguing against change have always reached for the morality of the enfranchised majority, but does any hon. Member believe today that Wilberforce was wrong—although at the time the Cabinet, the monarchy and Britain's most powerful interests were ranged against him? The same enfranchised majority wished to deny women the vote, but does anyone believe today that the country would be a better place if women did not sit in the House? Until tragically recently, a similar morality justified the treatment of some people as different members of the human race, and as inferior beings, because of the colour of their skins.

Today, we are debating again whether the criminal law should continue to discriminate between heterosexual and homosexual relationships. This is an issue of compassion, and of protection; but it is also, crucially, an issue of discrimination. The current law is wrong because it is wrong. Hon. Members should consider carefully what we mean by right and wrong. Currently, young people may be forced to spend the first years of their sexual awareness—their early adult years—knowing that, if they express their true feelings, they may spend time in prison. That can breed only shame, fear, resentment and—as the evidence of countless children's organisations shows—a culture of bullying.

Let us be clear. The issue is about whether a relationship between one human being and another should be a criminal act. It is not about urging people to be promiscuous, or urging young people to have sex at 16. It is not a debate about anal intercourse. It is a debate about whether society should judge young people to be criminals because, at 16, their sexual orientation sets them apart from a so-called majority.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Will my hon. Friend explain how the argument that he advances could not then be applied to any new age of consent set at a lower level: 15 or 14, as other organisations are already requesting?

Mr. Woodward: My hon. Friend makes a fair point. It is something to which I will come to in my remarks.

We need an equal age of consent to protect young people from injustice and from prejudice. It will protect them from fear and from exploitation. Crucially, it will also protect their health. By amending the law, we will make them part of a civil and civilised society and strengthen our society for all of us—heterosexual or homosexual.

I respect the views of those who take a different view from me on the important moral issue of the age of consent, but, in thinking of their reasons, hon. Members should ask themselves the actual reason behind their arguments. Is it reason, is it principle or is it prejudice masquerading as principle?

We load on to those young people whom we ostracise at the moment a burden of responsibility, and risk ignoring the far greater worries that I have seen many times in my work for Childline. The immorality is not committed by gay young men who wish to engage in a consenting relationship with someone of their age but by those in the heterosexual community: by and large, the abuse of children is committed not by homosexual people, but by heterosexual people. Very often, they are in a position of trust. Sadly, the Bill will not make it any easier to identify them. Far too often, the abuse happens in the confines of the home and is perpetrated by those whom children most trust. The issue of the age of consent is far different because it is something that the House can change.

The Bishop of Bath and Wells spoke eloquently on the subject in what was probably the most important speech in another place last year. He said:

"I cannot help but feel that there is a scapegoating procedure going on here which is not new in history and not new in our society."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 22 July 1998; Vol. 592, c. 953.]

Tonight, we have a chance to end the scapegoating. We have a chance because we genuinely have an opportunity to ask ourselves whether we speak from principle or from prejudice; whether we speak from knowledge, or are simply rehearsing old stories and old prejudices that we have given ourselves no time fully to reflect on and consider.

I say again to hon. Members who are unhappy with the Bill: have they truly looked at the evidence? Have they spoken to organisations that work with young people? Have they spoken to the medical profession? Have they spoken to the psychiatrists who have to pick up the pieces for those who are damaged by the legislation as it currently stands? After all, it was so-called principle which led us to sustain a slave trade, and which, in South Africa, allowed the townships of apartheid to be sustained for so long.

Let those who reach easily for opinion polls ask what a Gallup or a MORI in the mid-18th century would have told us about the slave trade. Would it have been right to use that evidence to sustain that inhuman, unjust and barbaric practice, which degraded not only those engaged in that trade but the society that condoned it?

The House would do well to remember the views of one of its most principled members this century. Enoch Powell argued from first principles. Soon after the 1967 report on homosexual offences, he stood firmly—against many—for its implementation. Public opinion would not have been with him, but today a majority are in favour of what he stood for. He was convinced on principle. For him it was a matter of freedom, but it was also about leadership, which required bravery. This is a time for Parliament to do the right thing: to amend the law and demonstrate leadership.

Parliament is addressing the issue in 1999. There can be no more fitting time to change the law than as we approach the next millennium. This has been a remarkable century—remarkable for its achievements, but remarkable for its injustice, too. As a society, we may like to think that we have come a long way, but there is still much that we have to learn, and much to do.

Some hon. Members may be aware of the wonderful lectures given by Leonard Bernstein at Harvard. He spoke of the repeated cycle in this century of greed and hypocrisy, which led to genocidal war, which led to a time of post-war hysteria, injustice, booms, crashes and totalitarianism, before the cycle repeated itself. In all that, there is a profound sense of injustice. Our capacity for injustice is enormous. Tonight we have an opportunity to redress that.

Some will say that there is a moral case not to amend the law, but there is a stronger moral case for change. The argument is not about numbers and how many people will be affected. It should not be about majorities or minorities. It does not matter whether we are talking about 5,000, 50,000, 500,000 or 5 million people. Discrimination is bad. It is abhorrent in principle and should be removed wherever we find it.

The House should be aware of the pain that the law engenders. We need to look at the evidence. That must come before our feelings. I ask those who are against the Bill to look again at the evidence. If they will not, they must ask themselves why. In 1989, the United States Department of Health and Human Services produced a report on youth suicide, which said:

"Gay youths are 2-3 times more likely to attempt suicide than other young people. They may comprise up to 30 per cent. of completed youth suicides annually."

It also said:

"The root of the problem of gay youth suicide is a society that discriminates against and stigmatises homosexuals while failing to recognise that a substantial number of its youth has a gay or lesbian orientation."

A number of voluntary organisations that work with young people in this country provide tragic evidence of the loneliness and despair that those young people feel because of the way in which our society continues to discriminate. Bullying is a real problem in our schools. Accusations of homosexuality provide plenty of cause for those who wish to bully.

Some argue that we should uphold the discrimination because boys, unlike girls, are not mature enough at 16 to make decisions about their sexuality. Many hon. Members will find it bizarre that young men should be thought to need such protection, but that young women should not. That is an insult to young men and a crude injustice to young women. I ask those who fight for the status quo, why should not women be equal before the law, too?

The greatest responsibility that any of us will assume in our adult lives is that of being a parent. I have four children. The first was born when I was nearly 30, but legally I could have been a father at 16. Our current law recognises the maturity of a 16-year-old for the greatest responsibility that any individual can undertake—that of being a parent responsible for another human being during their childhood years. Yet as regards personal orientation, the law would seek to deny that individual his or her maturity. If one's orientation is homosexual, one is an outlaw. To practise it is criminal.

As a Conservative, I believe firmly in freedom and the rule of law. As a Conservative, I ask my hon. Friends this: why should the law interfere in the private behaviour of citizens when that behaviour does no harm to others? The answer should be the same for those who dislike homosexuality as for those who practise it. The answer should be that there should be no discrimination—for a Conservative, because he or she believes in individual freedom; for a Socialist, because he or she believes in equality.

The rule of law should be there to uphold our freedom, and to protect it. We must protect our children, and that is why we need an age of consent. However, the question that we are addressing today is not whether there should or should not be an age of consent—of course there should. Today, we are debating whether we should continue to use the power of criminal law to discriminate between heterosexual and homosexual acts, and by doing so, terrorise young people and cause terrible damage at the critical age when they are embarking on their first adult, mature relationships with another human being.

Mr. Ashton: The age of consent was not plucked out of thin air in the first place. It goes back to the case of W. T. Stead, who bought a young child to prove that children could be bought for prostitution. The age of consent was then 13. Eventually, 16 was chosen as the age for marriage because that was the age when it was thought that a young girl could deliver and feed a child that would have a fair chance of living—which, in those days, it would not have had if the mother was 12 or 13. Sixteen was also the age at which it was thought a young man could earn a living wage. That is why the age for marriage was set at 16. It came from a court case concerning a newspaper editor who bought a child to prove that it could be done. He went to prison because he defended himself instead of having a lawyer who could have proved that the child's parents were not married. It is a long saga, but the hon. Gentleman will see how the age emerged if he reads the books in the Library.

Mr. Woodward: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Crucially, the debate is not about whether we should lower the current age of consent for heterosexual people. It is about whether or not we should continue to outlaw and criminalise the activities of those people who, through no fault of their own—and far too often people wish to ascribe fault in this matter, which is a nonsensical proposal—are homosexual. There is no discrimination in the eyes of most people in this country. There is in the law, and the law needs to be amended. The purpose of the Bill is to amend the law and remove the discrimination.

Let us be clear about what the law can and cannot do. As a trustee of Childline, I am aware that the sexual abuse of children is a criminal offence—rightly so. The sad truth is that the law alone has not been able to prevent sexual abuse within the family. In the past 10 years, Childline has worked hard to change the climate in which children can report sexual abuse.

Childline's work is based on listening to children—listening to their pain and their suffering. Perhaps 15 or 20 years ago, people in this country did not want to recognise the scale of sexual abuse. However, it was there, and Childline now deals with tens of thousands of cases of child abuse every year.

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Childline has learnt from listening to children, and we should learn from listening to young people. If we believe in learning and listening, we would do well to study the considerable volume of work by those charities working in the field of child protection. It is significant that the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children supports an equal age of consent, saying:

"In our view, there should be equality because continuing discrimination in law against homosexuals stigmatises young people growing up gay, hinders them from developing a positive self image and prevents them from seeking information and help in coming to terms with their sexuality."

The NSPCC is in the company of charities such as Save the Children, Barnardos, National Children's Bureau, the British Youth Council, the Family Welfare Association and the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux—the organisations are legion—as well as those in the medical profession. Medical professionals believe that we better protect young people by an equal age of consent.

The evidence is supported most clearly by the work of the British Medical Association, but there are others. We should remind ourselves of the BMA statement:

"There is no convincing reason against reducing the age of consent for male homosexuals to 16 and to do so may yield positive health benefits."

The Health Education Authority supports that position, believing that the current legislation works against promoting health care in young people. It believes that the law as it stands restricts getting health information about sexual diseases, AIDS and HIV to young people. Teachers and youth workers are inhibited from working with young homosexual men and women because of the law. Do we really believe that Parliament should ignore the advice of all those bodies and all those professionals who work with and listen to young people?

Let us clear up one ludicrous myth that continues to be perpetuated by those who want to cling on to the status quo. Homosexuality does not cause AIDS; the HIV virus does. The all-party parliamentary group on AIDS said:

"Effective health promotion strategies work best in a supportive and open climate. The evidence presented to the hearing made clear that barriers to such a climate were perceived to include the unequal age of consent for homosexual men."

Unprotected sex carries health risks, not only for young men engaging with young men but for young men engaging with women. Whatever one's orientation, unprotected sex is dangerous. Unsafe sex always carries the risk of HIV infection, and it is significant that HIV is highly prevalent in Africa because of unsafe sex; it is of epidemic proportions and, by and large, it is devastating heterosexual, not homosexual, communities in Africa.

Those who have painted AIDS as a gay plague face a heavy responsibility for the spread of AIDS and HIV today. Their prejudice and ignorance and their refusal to examine the medical and social evidence mean that entire heterosexual communities in Africa are being wiped out, because of the failure to understand that AIDS and HIV are spread by unsafe sexual practices.

Dr. Julian Lewis: To help to set my ignorance at rest, can my hon. Friend tell me whether he accepts that the practice of anal sex, whether between a man and a man or between a man and a woman, is more likely to spread HIV and AIDS than the practice of what is generally called straight sex?

Mr. Woodward: The House has an opportunity to examine some of the prejudices behind my hon. Friend's comments. In his amusing autobiography, Stephen Fry points out that anal intercourse is of course not the prerogative of the homosexual community. He says that many homosexuals do not practise anal sex and that, if one considers the numbers and the fact that most people are heterosexual, it is a practice indulged in largely by heterosexuals: the straight people to whom my hon. Friend referred.

The reality is that the continuation of the wish to belittle, trivialise and caricature the relationships between homosexuals does enormous damage in our society. When people are prepared to grow up and approach the issue in a mature, considered way, we will be able to have a serious debate.

Mr. Bradshaw: I thank my hon. Friend—and I use that term deliberately—for giving way. Perhaps I can help him in his conversation with the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis). The main cause of the spread of HIV in Africa is heterosexual, vaginal intercourse. The infectivity of the virus is exacerbated by the heavy presence of other sexually transmitted diseases with which it might be possible to deal if the appropriate medical treatment were available.

I am sorry to have interrupted my hon. Friend's excellent speech. If his party had the sense to grasp the sort of leadership that he is showing, it might regain power in 15 years or so.

Mr. Woodward: I may have to be cautious in responding to the hon. Gentleman's approbation, but I welcome it.

In this country, the greatest risk associated with unprotected sex is not that of spreading HIV or AIDS. It arises when heterosexual people engage in unsafe sex, and it involves not only sexually transmitted diseases but the possibility that a young woman will suffer an unwanted pregnancy and that a young man will become a father.

At 16, young males are engaging in their first meaningful physical relationships. It is a time for learning, and for maturing—not for fathering a child. I am grateful that I did not do so until I was nearly 30: if I had fathered a child at 16, my life would have been very different. To have become a father at that age would not have been good, but I do not believe that it would have been right if the law had said that, at 16, I should not have engaged in a mature relationship with another person. The reality is that, in Britain, there are 14,000 pregnancies every year involving young girls. If my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East is worried about risks, he should concentrate his efforts on that figure.

However, we do not use the criminal law to prevent heterosexual 16-year-olds from taking those risks. Instead, we rightly resort to education and information. My hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East may have proper motives in wishing to examine the sexual practices of people in Africa and the regularity of indulgence in anal intercourse in heterosexual or homosexual relationships,

but I can tell him that time spent with those organisations that work with and help young people suffering from HIV and AIDS is time well spent.

By the same principle, we should use education and information rather than the criminal law to help young gay men aged 16 and over to avoid exposing themselves to unnecessary risks.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I wish to associate myself 100 per cent. with all the points that the hon. Gentleman has made in his magnificent speech, and to point out, in connection with the earlier intervention by the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis), that decriminalisation is very important in helping to get health and education messages through to people who may be putting themselves at risk. The British Medical Association is in many ways a conservative body, but it supported unanimously—for reasons of health education and for other reasons—the proposal to reduce and equalise the age of consent at 16.

Mr. Woodward: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. The criminal law will never stop people having sex. However, an effective HIV prevention strategy will be impossible to implement if the law always makes the activity in question a criminal offence.

Many people have raised the question whether a change in the law will lead to more young men becoming the victims of predatory older men. There is no evidence of that happening in other countries where there is an equal age of consent, although I am entirely sure that that prejudice is not the exclusive prerogative of these shores. However, the question gives rise to another: why should the law protect young men—if it can—from the predatory individual, but not young women? If we need a law to protect young men from predatory older men, why should not women be protected as well?

The sad truth is that some people in our society will prey on younger people. The evidence for that is plentiful in every square in every town in the country. We need to encourage a climate in which those who are preyed upon feel safe to report those who menace them.

The law should not distinguish between young men and young girls in consenting relationships, but young men and women are equal victims when it comes to predatory behaviour. Predators are predators, victims are victims and all victims need protection.

We are discussing the relationship between consenting people. The debate is not about an activity that is forced on young people. Rape is rape and indecent assault is indecent assault, whether it is between a man and a woman, a woman and a woman, or a man and a man. All acts that are illegal because they are not consenting are illegal and should remain so. No one is suggesting that this Bill should in any way legitimise assault. Indeed, by changing the climate in which assaults can be reported, the Bill will do the very opposite. We need to feel sure that we are putting in place a better judicial system, in which victims will be able to come forward. This legislation will help.

The present climate, by its very discrimination, often prevents people from reporting rape and indecent assault by other men. Many police officers say that it is a real problem that remains to be tackled. However, it is just as important for a 17-year-old man to report such an offence as for a 37-year-old man. Many 37-year-old or 57-year-old men and women still do not report assault and rape because they are afraid of the stigma that goes with it.

Discrimination against gay people discourages them from going to the police because they continue to fear the stigma that society bestows on them. All young adults in consenting relationships need sex education. They need advice, which is important. Indeed, it is particularly important for young people who may be gay because they are often going through a particularly uncertain period and it is particularly challenging to them. They hesitate to seek such advice because they fear that in so doing they will be breaking the law. The same law inhibits those who want to help or counsel young people. We should remember that while homophobia may be a new word it is not a new experience. It is deep-rooted in our society and it affects young people tragically.

If young people who are gay are attacked, they can be at risk of being prosecuted simply by reporting that they have been involved in what is effectively illegal activity as the law stands. They render themselves open to blackmail and to exploitation. Where is the morality in continuing with such injustice?

In 1994, when the House debated lowering the age of consent to 18, some Members thought a compromise was necessary. Apparently, that would allow the consequences of stopping halfway at 18, rather than taking the law to an equal age of consent at 16, to be assessed. That was five years ago. Since then, too many young people have continued to suffer and yet there is no evidence to support the argument that a discriminatory age of consent has been of benefit.

We are all aware of the crime problems on our streets. Is it sensible and wise for the House to continue to encourage police resources to be used to pursue young people engaging in consensual activity, predominantly with people of their own age? Of course, it is not.

Mr. Rowe: Homosexual behaviour sometimes comes to light when the police are investigating something else. It is suggested that when it does come to light, they are distracted from the crime that they originally intended to pursue and pursue that with rather more vigour. That is part and parcel of the discrimination of which my hon. Friend speaks.

Mr. Woodward: Clearly, discrimination in whatever form is bad. The distraction of the police at a time when people continue to worry about crime is bad.

Criminalising consensual relationships is wrong. The law can continue to outlaw meaningful relationships, but we can be certain that it will not suppress the expression of feelings between one individual and another. Our present law is the law of the intolerant and it has a bullying element. For those who are homosexual, it is a law that encourages not meaningful relationships but clandestine behaviour, fear and isolation. As the columnist Simon Jenkins wrote a few years ago,

> "The current situation represents the persecution of a minority to appease the prejudice of a majority."

Today, we have the opportunity to end the persecution and let prejudice give way to reason, evidence and principle. Historians will look back at this period of discrimination against young people with the same

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opprobrium with which we now look back on those who sought to justify the slave trade. Historians will simply ask, "How could they go on justifying something that was so patently unfair and unjust?"

A few months ago, I celebrated my 40th birthday and was given a cigarette box; politically correct Members will disapprove because smoking is deeply unfashionable. On the box was a quote from the composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein. It is very meaningful because it talks about the pilot light in all our lives that burns for something better. Bernstein often reflected in his work on the meaning of our life. He felt compelled to talk about the

"life and death importance of living out"

what he described as "the will to love". He spoke of the struggle to ensure that

"love was a practical reality",

and of the need

"To remind ourselves by nudging our awareness of the profound moral imperative we share to make our lives, moment by moment, an uninterrupted action of bearing witness."

Today, whatever our faith, we have the opportunity to show our humanity, to nudge our awareness, to encourage meaningful relationships for those who are homosexual but have the misfortune to be between 16 and 18. We have the chance to bear witness, to show our maturity and to make our country a better, more tolerant and more understanding society. I hope that hon. Members will take this chance to do something that is not only right but good.

5.52 pm

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): I must congratulate the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) on one of the most powerful speeches that I have ever heard. It was certainly one of the most reasoned, and I found it emotional too. I do not disagree with a word that he said. In years to come, his speech will spark a chord in all our hearts and remind us of a day when reason overtook the unreasonable, and compassion took the place of prejudice.

I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) and for Brentford and Isleworth (Ann Keen) because without them, we would not be discussing this crucial progression in our social history. I thank them wholeheartedly for their contributions.

Having heard some of my best arguments stolen in this reasoned debate, I shall revert to the position of a mother who must consider as her children grow the sort of world that she wants them to occupy, the space that she wants them to live in, the values that the world upholds and what she wants for them. The teenage years are turbulent for us all, regardless of sexuality. It is a difficult and traumatic time even for members of the majority. Members of minority groups of any sort—sexuality can constitute one—find life incredibly difficult. One need have only a few freckles or red hair, or wear spectacles—I speak from experience—to know the cruel remarks that friends at school will make. That must be multiplied a thousand times if one stands out like a sore thumb as a result of one's—I hesitate to use the word "preference" even though Stonewall do—sexuality, or of the people to whom one is most attracted.

Let us examine where attraction comes from. It is not correct to talk about choice and life style. We all make choices about our partners, but we do not choose any old partner. As a woman, looking around the Chamber, I could not say that I would be automatically attracted to every man here. Indeed, as a happily married woman, I hesitate to say that I would be attracted to anyone. In their choices of partners, women choose from a selective group of particular individuals who are attractive to them. Likewise, heterosexual males are not attracted to any old woman; I like to think that they have some discrimination in their choice of partners. The same is true of same-sex couples.

Towards the end of his speech, the hon. Member for Witney used the word "love". I think that that word needs to be introduced to this debate with some vigour. Same-sex couples, male or female, have the same deep love for each other as other couples. I do not argue that when we fall passionately in love at 16, that love will sustain us throughout our lives; I have made such errors myself, as I am sure have other hon. Members. We cannot denounce one sort of love as less valuable than any other. For the person who loves, love is an absolute feeling. To deny people that love would be criminal in itself.

In supporting children in their burgeoning sexuality—exploring as they do, often tentatively, how to develop their relationships, how to speak to people to whom they are attracted, and what experiments are safe—I would not want anyone's child not to feel free to approach a parent or guardian, or someone with whom they feel safe, to discuss how to go forward.

Laura Moffatt (Crawley): As one mother to another, I am sure that if we were going to act on our prejudices, we would say that our love is so fierce for our children that we would not want them to have anything to do with the same or opposite sex until they were 30—but that is not a reasonable response or a reasonable love. We would not want our children to grow up like that. Does my hon. Friend agree that what comes from within sometimes has nothing to do with how our society best moves forward or with how we ensure that our children are best protected?

Kali Mountford: I have often wished that my children would wait until they were 30 or even 45 because I want to protect them from any mistake in their choice of partner or in having children at an early age. It is reasonable for a mother to feel that, notwithstanding the fact that one does not want to accept that one has reached such an age. If we truly love our children, we want them to have the best from relationships that they can possibly have. That means that we sometimes have to accept them as sentient beings, capable of making their own decisions and choices. We must accept that their feelings are valid, even if we would wish that they were not as they are. We may fear for children when they choose same-sex partners because we know the prejudice that they will encounter in daily life. If as parents, or as a society, we denounce them and deny them the support that they need, what a difficult life we impose on them. That leads to the traumas that the hon. Member for Witney described, and the possibility of facing suicidal choices.

Can people go on denying themselves as people and conform to some social view? If ever there was a debate where the personal and the political, the public and the private, were brought together, this is it. Here we have

Parliament making statements and pronouncements on our most intimate feelings and on the most intimate ways in which we conduct ourselves in our public and private lives.

Whatever our children's sexuality, we would all want to make distinctions about how they operate in their sexual lives. We certainly do not want too many public demonstrations of sexuality, because in the normal run of a day's events, that is not appropriate behaviour. However, it is bizarre to believe that someone who has a preference for a partner of the same sex is likely to be more demonstrative in public, more promiscuous and more offensive than someone who prefers a partner of the opposite sex. I have often had occasion to view the passions of teenagers displayed in public places and I have thought such behaviour inappropriate. If it were a child of mine, I would admonish that child, saying, "That is something to be done in private, my dear." However, I have never had occasion to admonish a same-sex couple for that sort of behaviour.

The very fact that same-sex couples keep their affections secret strikes me as sad. Society already denounces their relationships to such an extent that even to hold hands in the street is difficult for same-sex couples, regardless of how much they love each other; whereas for heterosexual couples quite extraordinary behaviour in the most public of places appears to be perfectly acceptable. There is a real contradiction in the value our society attaches to different sets of couples.

The crucial word in all of that has to be love, and if we think about love, we must think about compassion. Some hon. Members have deeply held religious feelings, but I would point out that all the world's major religions about which I have read are based on compassion and love. Although interpretations of those religions vary—I accept that people hold different views on the teachings of all the world's religions, not only Christianity—I urge hon. Members to look again at their religious values and beliefs, for they are saying something sad about civilisation as a whole if they are without compassion.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Lady is making a thought-provoking speech. In the course of that speech, will she set out her view, as my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) set out his, on the practical effects of equalisation?

Kali Mountford: I had hoped to come to those remarks later. Everything we do has practical effects, and the law as it stands has practical effects. One of those practical effects is prejudiced bullying, resulting in the state of mind of individuals who are denounced reaching the point where they conclude that they have to commit suicide. Sadly, suicide is not a rare event in the homosexual community. The incidence is especially high in the younger age group, whose members are not emotionally ready to deal with such prejudice being heaped on them at a tender age. For such an overwhelming social view and the weight of the law to be dumped upon a mere child is heavy indeed.

Dr. Julian Lewis: What does it say about the state of mind of a 16 or 17-year-old child—I use the word child deliberately—that he would commit suicide rather than wait 18 months or two years until his act was perfectly legal? What does that say about his vulnerability and about his suitability to engage in any sort of sexual relationship?

Kali Mountford: It would be extraordinary if all individuals had to be psychologically tested before being allowed to commit any sexual act. If we were in that position—with so much hatred being heaped upon us by the people who were prejudiced against us, or being subjected to the indifference of society as a whole to our love and feelings—we might conclude, as some people do, that suicide was a rational act, because of our fears about how our life would unfold and because of society's lack of acceptance of our feelings for others. How we love another individual is such an intrinsic part of our humanity that for society to denounce it is far too great a burden to impose, not only on 16 or 17-year-olds, but on anyone at any stage of his or her life. Suicide is not an act committed only by homosexuals. My point is that such denunciation is too much of a burden to place on young people, because it can lift the threshold of despair to such a level that suicide is a more likely choice.

The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) asked about practical effects, and we have not fully investigated that subject. One practical effect of equalisation would be the opening up of society as a whole to greater acceptance of one individual by another. That effect is a valid aim in itself. By basing our society on compassion and love, and by being supportive of individuals and not threatening them, we remove one criminal act, which means that police time can be spent on matters more fruitful than investigations into the private behaviour of individuals whose actions are of concern to no one but themselves. We must stop pretending that the law as it stands offers protection to the individual. When they fall in love, people do not necessarily require our protection, whether or not they form a same-sex couple. What they need is protection that allows them to investigate their sexuality in private, which brings us to the root of the problem.

We started the debate by discussing choice and preference, but I contend that no choice is made, other than that of a particular partner. Our sexuality is an intrinsic part of ourselves—I believe that it is intrinsic at the time we are born. I know that there is debate about whether or not an individual's sexuality is fully developed by the age of 11, 13, or 16, but there is physical evidence to suggest that our sexuality is determined while we are still in the womb. There is plenty of evidence from family groups that suggests that sexuality is a genetic trait. That evidence is so strong that it is daft to pretend that, somehow and at some point, we can be lured into a type of sexuality that is against our nature. It is as ridiculous as saying that our eye colour, which is determined at birth, can be changed at the age of 16 without the aid of contact lenses. I cannot change my eye colour from blue to brown; nor can I change my sexual orientation. I cannot accept that we can be lured away from our nature.

That is not to say that people do not need protection from sexual predators. That is why I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw, even though I do not want the debate on the age of consent and the acceptance of individual sexuality to be confused with

[Kali Mountford]

arguments that homosexuals are more likely to be predatory, to be paedophiles, to commit lewd acts in public, or to be promiscuous.

Mr. Bradshaw: I have just heard an hon. Member say, from a sedentary position, "They are." Perhaps my hon. Friend can help that person by referring to some of the evidence quoted by the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward), to the effect that, as a proportion of the population, paedophilia is far more prevalent among heterosexuals.

Kali Mountford: I did not hear the remark to which my hon. Friend refers, but he is quite right: paedophiles most often prey on young girls. Although there is some evidence that young boys are preyed on, it is often young girls who need our protection most. The House should be grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw for raising the issue, because it changes the scope and content of the debate from consent and the acceptance of homosexuality as valid to how we as a society should be acting and how we should be protecting people—taking account of individuals' circumstances—not trying to police sexuality, which is what is happening at present.

If the Bill is passed, those who prey on young people and exploit their blossoming sexuality will have to change their behaviour. We shall have recourse in law to challenge that behaviour and do something about it. All too often, society has viewed the issue upside down and sought simply to prevent people's legitimate activities and loving relationships, as if that would somehow have an impact on the sort of illegitimate activity that has been mentioned.

The example has been cited of a young person who might want to get on in their career and of someone else using their more powerful position to exploit that fact. In this example, the senior person—possibly a teacher or boss—might say, "I'm senior to you, and if you want to get on or see your talent nurtured, it would be a good idea to have a relationship with me." Quite often, such activity might even seem legitimate to the young person. Blinded by their passion for their art or craft, or possibly by their passion for the other person, they might not recognise the exploitative nature of such a relationship—and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw for raising that particular point.

I have represented much older women who had been exploited by their bosses and who realised at a later date what had happened. They found that they had no recourse in law to do anything about it. To me, the issue is not one of age or acceptance of someone's sexual orientation but one of how we as a society accept the exploitative nature of some relationships and the loving nature of others. There is a distinction: to blur the two does a huge injustice to people who simply want a mutually consenting relationship.

To judge from their sedentary comments and their interventions, it seems that some hon. Members have a very confused attitude towards sexuality overall. All prejudice is based on fear, often fear of the unknown or, in this instance, fear of someone making unwelcome approaches. What I would say to those people is similar to what the hon. Member for Witney said. I would say, "Examine your conscience and your feelings." Prejudice based on fear and ignorance does no service to the law. The law should be written on and upheld by facts and evidence. There is no evidence to support the disparity in the law for those who prefer same-sex partners, yet there is room in the law to say that exploitative relationships should be denounced wherever they are found and that there should be recourse to the law to deal with them. I have some reservations about the Bill because it seems to continue that confusion.

Going back to what I said earlier about nurturing and motherhood, I would dread to think that a child of mine might be preyed on by an adult in the formative years and that that child would feel that there was nowhere to go to deal with the dreadful sense of inadequacy that arises from having been used and abused. My hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw mentioned many of the famous cases concerning children in local authority care. In Committee, I should like to explore further the relevant part of the Bill because I am concerned about those individuals, mostly women, who, even under the Bill, would still find themselves exploited but would have no redress. In his closing remarks, perhaps the Minister will be able to remind me of where in law such women can seek redress.

In recent years, we have heard of many high-profile cases involving, for example, stalking, to which the Government responded admirably and introduced a new law. Exploitative relationships certainly occur in the workplace. The ones I am talking about took place when I was a trade union activist, representing members who had been exploited in the workplace. In my view, no exploitative relationship is acceptable. I am glad that we are taking steps to deal with that aspect of some people's sexuality. However, it is a part of the Bill that needs more consideration.

I asked at the beginning what sort of society we want and what values we are going to uphold. For me, equality, both before the law and in society, is an absolute. The House turns its back on equality at its peril. Opposition Members have cited examples of polls taken in many and varied ways, involving different questions asked at different times. They used these polls as evidence to say that the public do not want change. I would challenge that because of the way some of the polls were conducted, but I would also challenge the House to consider its position at this moment in history, and to consider how it can take a lead in changing society's views.

Very often, the House is at odds with public feeling. That is not a reason or an excuse to do nothing. Much of this debate has centred on morality and what we consider morality to be. A society that excludes people, whether it is one to 500,000 or 500,000 to 1 million, on spurious grounds is not a civilised society. If we reject the Bill, in years to come we will look back and wonder why we did not take the opportunity to move forward. Doing nothing is not an option. If we do nothing, progress in accepting each other as equals will be knocked back. We will be saying that we are continuing down a reactionary road, a road that I do not want to travel. It is my contention that in years to come the public will not wish us to have travelled it either. My constituents certainly do not wish me to do so.

I shall not share the contents of my postbag with the House, but I shall mention just one of my constituents who has written to me. He is in education at the moment,

but feels that there is no future for him as things stand. He feels isolated and he feels that if we miss this opportunity, we will be denouncing him personally. He does not deserve to be denounced and I, for one, will not denounce him.

6.20 pm

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): There is a daring principle held by those who reject the morality of the Bible that a nation can be morally sound without obedience to God's commandments. That principle is directly hostile to the experience of all nations. That morality can exist without conformity to God's law is destitute of both proof and probability. The phenomenon of morals without religion has never been witnessed in any nation in the past and will not be witnessed in the future.

Those who want to destroy standards and lower safeguards can easily apply the label of morality to their principles, but when they advocate those principles, their real objective is to get rid of morality and religion. This nation has a soul and a conscience, but it has no eternity. Every person in this Chamber has a soul and a conscience and every person has eternity to face. We shall all give account of ourselves to almighty God at the end of the day, but nations are judged in time for their policies, their moralities, their violence and their crimes.

What of the great nations of the past—the dominant nations that led the world, controlled destinies and became the great empires? What of Babylon? What of Persia? What of the Greek kingdom? What of the great Roman empire? What destroyed them? One has only to read the history books to realise the debris that they left because they gave themselves over to the very things that pervert society and take it down a road that has only ruin at its end. The House very well knows that there is no history book that does not record the ruin of nations because of their departure from morality, truth and righteousness. Judgment will come in time, but it would be far better for us, as legislators, to try to avert such judgment coming upon this nation.

When the Home Secretary opened the debate, he referred to Europe. What Europe does today, the House will have to do tomorrow. There is no doubt about that. We can see that Europe is moving fast towards lowering the age of consent. Already, in Denmark, the age of consent is 15; in Finland, it is 15; in France, it is 15; in Italy, it is 14 to 16; in Spain, it is 12 and in Sweden, it is 15. Does the House really think that it will stand against the force of legislation from Europe on this matter?

We in Northern Ireland know what happened to our laws. It is perfectly clear that in Northern Ireland, for once, all the parties agreed that the age of consent should not be lowered, but it will come under the axe. *[Interruption.]* I do not know why anyone would laugh when we consider that one nation in Europe has lowered the age of consent to 12. That nation should hide its head in shame.

Dr. Harris: The hon. Gentleman may be interested to hear that the age of consent in Spain is not strictly 12. There is a provision whereby children between the ages of 12 and 16 will be prosecuted only if their parents complain about their relationship. That is not the same as saying that the age of consent is 12, and it does not suggest that we must follow that example. The argument is not that we follow Europe. Sin, according to the hon. Gentleman's terms, is no more rife in other parts of Europe than it is here and it need not be rife here if we modernise and equalise our laws.

Rev. Ian Paisley: The hon. Gentleman should be very clear about Spain because in Spain, as he knows, and as a document supplied to me by the Library says,

"there is no statutory age of consent. In general . . . sexual relations are not penalised from the age of 12."

To say that the House will not follow Europe is absolutely wrong. The House must follow Europe because power will rest in Europe.

It is perfectly clear that across Europe—I have witnessed this since the first elections to the European Parliament—the edge of prosecution for certain criminal offences is being dulled. Countries increasingly roll back the laws of the land and remove the criminality from some offences. That is a movement that is most dangerous for us.

We have heard tonight, and rightly so, of the need for compassion and love, but parents feel that our actions will increasingly affect their children. In other words, their children are potential victims who are being targeted. In the House today I was given some propaganda published by Outrage! that makes it clear that children should be questioning their teachers. It says:

"You have the right to know"

and asks:

"Why don't your teachers tell you the truth?"

That undermines teachers' integrity and challenges their accuracy. The purpose of that document is to target young people and children. No parents with compassion and love—or, in other words, intolerance of evil—want their children to be targeted. Do we want that? Is that the aim of the House tonight? When we consider what is happening in Europe, we should be strengthening, not pulling down safeguards.

I know that there are many religious arguments on this matter. In such a debate, it is usually said that the Bible may make strong statements in the Old Testament, but not in the New Testament. That, of course, demonstrates ignorance of the New Testament, which is equally strong in its denunciation of what the Bible states is not normal practice, but abnormal practice and perversion. We need to face up to that if we are to be honest about the matter. This is a solemn subject because it affects our children and our children's children.

The House would do better not to follow those who agitate that we should lower the age of consent because even they must admit that public opinion is not with them. We should safeguard our children and our future. We can do so only by sticking to the principles of true morality, which are found in the 10 commandments of God's word.

6.30 pm

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): Two remarkable speeches have been made from the Opposition Benches. One was of the politics of tolerance, enlightenment and compassion, a politics which rarely dares to speak its name in the Conservative party, and one, which we have just heard, of the politics whose name is all too often spoken in Northern Ireland. I welcome very much the

[Mr. Denis MacShane]

speech by the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward). I hope that he is glad, as I am, that we will give this modest piece of legislation—I would not elevate it to the importance that he did—a Second Reading under a Labour Home Secretary, just as 30 years ago, another Labour Home Secretary, now Lord Jenkins, took the first steps in this direction.

By contrast with the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler)—I was not sure from his Uriah Heepish speech, in which he seemed to want to be nice to the gay community but terrified of saying no to the opinion polls, how he intends to vote—I shall say which way I shall vote. I shall vote in support of the Bill.

I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) and for Brentford and Isleworth (Mrs. Keen), who have given the lie to the widespread thesis propagated by commentators that Back Benchers have no influence. This major piece of legislation, which has been worked out in considerable detail by Ministers and officials, is taking up parliamentary time to become law because my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw, who I think described himself in debates on the Queen's Speech as Compo, but would be very much one of the younger members of the "Last of the Summer Wine" team, dug in his heels, and because my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth very bravely stood up in the House, drawing very much from her family experience, to do something that brought her opprobrium from some at the time. The House should note that.

I shall vote for this Bill for three simple reasons. First, the law is cruel and also an ass. As far as I can see from the very complex columns of figures in the document on this measure provided in the House of Commons Library, there have been no more than five convictions for crimes involving people between the ages of 16 and 18 in the past two years. A law that has become out of date perhaps needs revision. Secondly, I was struck the other day to learn that the British Army still recruits boy soldiers. If we can send young men under the age of 18 to die for Britain and ask them to shed their blood for our country, we can allow them to express their sexuality in their private lives.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): Is the hon. Gentleman advocating a reduction of the age at which cigarettes and alcohol may be purchased to 16, or is he happy that young men can go to war—possibly giving their lives—at the age of 16, as he correctly said, but are not allowed to have a pint of beer and a cigarette afterwards?

Mr. MacShane: That remark is not worthy of a debate which, on the whole, so far, has been conducted fairly seriously on both sides of the House.

Thirdly, the point that has most influenced my opinion is that, as a parent of three girls and one boy who have not yet reached the age of 16, I find it preposterous that, whatever their sexuality, the three girls may do as they wish once they reach the age of 16 without facing criminal sanctions, but should my son declare himself gay or become, or express himself as a gay, he could face criminal sanction. As a parent, I find it unacceptable that the law should say yes to my daughters, but mean that I would have to visit my son in prison.

Dr. Harris: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. MacShane: If the hon. Gentleman will allow me, I should like to develop some points.

I make such remarks to explain why I shall vote as I will. It is illogical and preposterous that such discrimination is still written into our law. Having made that point, I want Ministers, who have voted for compassion and taken a libertarian and tolerant road—I applaud them for it—to ask themselves whether there is not more that we as a Government and a House can do to protect children. A boy or a girl, a young man or a young women, is very often still in a state of childhood at the age of 16.

We are seeing the relentless commercialisation, sexualisation, privatisation and, indeed, politicisation of childhood in our society. The best conclusion that we can draw from this debate and in passing the Bill is to commit ourselves as parents and elected Members of Parliament to do more to protect the family. This measure does not in any way reflect negatively on the new political imperative, which I feel strongly, to do more to protect the family. That cuts across left and right. Let no one from any party claim any monopoly on wisdom in that regard.

The commercialisation and privatisation of childhood is derived from the fact that, non-stop for the past 20 years, we have increased and strengthened the concept of the individual at the expense of the collective—the family is above all a collective community. In the labour market, for example, we have allowed complete freedom. Every person, notably women, has been encouraged—almost obliged due to low pay and lack of adequate protection for the family—to go out to work. We have undermined family life through an economic libertarianism, which has done so much damage.

We all applaud to the skies the role of the internet and of electronic commerce, without noticing that the main driving force on the internet at the moment is pornography—very often paedophiliac pornography. Each year, £2.5 billion is made in Hollywood from pornographic films. Anybody whose children log on to the internet, despite the gateway protection offered by service providers, will see how quickly paedophile messages come through. In this area, the libertarian approach, the economic anything-goes, the idea that the individual can do what he or she wants, must be balanced with a social obligation to stop the internet being a paedophile's paradise.

The hon. Members for Witney and for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) referred to the problem of advice on sexual education that is given to schools. I wish that the hon. Member for Witney had been present in the previous Parliament, when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Sir B. Mawhinney), formerly the right hon. Member for Peterborough, as a Minister in the Department of Health, tore up and threw out of the window a very modest sex education manual because the *Daily Mail* told him to. He pandered to the worst reactionary prejudices in our society.

To paraphrase the hon. Member for Witney, the problem with sex is not whether it is gay sex or so-called straight sex, but whether it is safe sex; sex in a context of

advice and eduction and sex within a loving relationship. I say to my hon. Friends, one of whom is a Minister in the Home Office following his promotion from the Department of Health, that, when our turn comes to provide adequate sex education for our children, let us not buckle under the pressure of the reactionaries on the Opposition Benches or those who write in many of our newspapers, who fill their colour magazines and feature pages with semi-paedophiliac adverts for clothes and other goods, which sexualise and trivialise our young people.

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): I have been listening very carefully to what the hon. Gentleman is saying, especially about the advice that he would give his young children as they grow up. How does he explain the fact that AIDS is far, far more prevalent among men than among women, and is almost unknown among young people? How does he advise his children about practices that may lead them—as they do to men especially, in the age group between 20 and 25—to a very serious health risk?

Mr. MacShane: I advise the hon. Lady to spend a long time in Africa, and then return. There she will find that the problem of AIDS is not confined to gay men.

I almost regret having mentioned my children at the start of the speech, but it was on a subject about which I feel passionately. Hon. Members who pray in aid their children open themselves to the newspaper treatment—children of hon. Members on both sides of the House have experienced this. The cheap way that much of the press gets at us as MPs is by using our children against us.

I conclude by extending an invitation to Ministers. I start by referring to a nice quotation by the Home Secretary. I do not know whether it was in last night's television documentary on the occupants of the Home Office; I confess that I recorded that and watched "The Scarlet Pimpernel". Now and then, we must have a moment off politics.

"You seek him here, you seek him there, you seek that Jack Straw everywhere." He is a fine Home Secretary and will render great service to our country, but he said that discussing the politics of families was like "walking on eggshells". One senses, across the party divide, the clear tension between what one might call the spirit of 1968—the libertarian, the individualistic, the "anything goes" spirit—and the instincts of those who now believe that preserving and strengthening the family must have a greater priority than ever it was afforded under the previous Government, when their economic policies, their labour market policies, their destruction of traditional male breadwinner policies and their fiscal policies did so much to undermine the family.

I invite the Home Secretary to get off the eggshells. I invite him not to worry too much about opinion polls or focus groups. A politics that is committed strongly to backing the family in fiscal policy, labour market policy and schools policy will command support in the House and in the country.

Tonight we shall vote on a necessary measure to relieve all parents of all children of both sexes of the preposterous notion that what their daughters might do is legal, but that what their sons might choose to do, if that be the case, is a crime. It will thus be a relief for parents and a modest contribution to family life, but there is far, far more to be done in that direction.

6.43 pm

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): The result of tonight's vote is clear. The House will vote for the Bill—and, as in every other free vote that has ever come before the House, I shall be on the losing side. Whether it is on abortion, divorce, capital punishment or hunting, I always seem to find myself on the losing side, but that does not shake my resolve. When I heard the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) speak about all the rather naughty, although pleasurable, things going on in Babylon, my determination wavered for a second, but I shall hold true to what I believe in, and I shall vote against the measure tonight, for clear reasons.

My first reason for voting against the measure is the fact that this vote will undoubtedly send the wrong message to the country, whatever hon. Members may say. There have been some good speeches, notably—although I did not agree with it—the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward), although I do not know whether it is necessary to take 40 minutes to make one's point. I shall try to speak for a slightly shorter time.

I believe that the measure will send the wrong message, for the following reason. I know that it is not popular in this place to talk about opinion polls—we consider the idea that we simply respond to what opinion pollsters say to be bad taste—but, that aside, let us ignore the fact that every opinion poll says that 70 per cent. of the country will disapprove of what we are doing tonight. Let us not talk in terms of statistics and figures. Let us just think what ordinary people—people like us—who have children really want.

What those people want, surely, is that their children grow up and start a family, in the way that they did, and bring up children in a loving environment at home. I think that, when those people learn the result of tonight's debate, they will feel that Parliament has betrayed them, and they will feel that Parliament has decided that there should be a moral equivalence between homosexuality and heterosexuality.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that when, last year, my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton), myself and one or two others tabled the amendment that the then No. 2 Minister at the Home Office—now Secretary of State for Wales—agreed to, we were told that there were to be proper and adequate safeguards for those aged 16 to 18? Does he agree with me, as a fellow practising lawyer, that two years is by no means an adequate sentence? The offence of indecent assault carries a sentence of 10 years, but the offence of incest carries a sentence of only two years—there has been a judicial eruption about that—while other graver sexual offences carry much more serious sentences.

Mr. Leigh: I agree with that point. Moreover, apparently, the Home Office has accepted that there will be very few prosecutions under the Bill. I may come to that in a moment, but I was making some general points of principle.

Parliament will vote for the measure—Parliament could vote for anything that it wanted; it could vote that there are 400 days in the year—but the public will not accept that there is a moral equivalence between those two sorts of behaviour. I know that those who promote the measure feel very strongly about these things, but perhaps they should accept that.

[Mr. Leigh]

Why do the public reject that moral equivalence? There is, I think, engraved on us a deep moral sense of what is right and wrong. Although we are no longer a Christian—or even a fundamentally religious—society, much of what we believe comes from that religious and moral foundation. Moreover, if one considers the teachings of any of the great spiritual leaders of the past 2,000 years—if one reads the Koran or the sacred writings of the Sikhs or the Hindus, let alone of the Christian religion—one sees that there is an unanimous viewpoint.

I say to the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Kali Mountford) that, of course, all those religions stress the need for compassion. Every Member of Parliament is appalled by homophobic behaviour; every Member of Parliament believes in toleration of those who may enjoy or believe in a different life style; but every one of those great world religions is absolutely clear, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that—for very good reasons—homosexual behaviour is wrong, and that it degrades society. Although the House sometimes giggles when the hon. Member for North Antrim stands up, because he speaks in a very old-fashioned way—an absolutist way—what he said is right. It does harm society if Parliament sends out this message.

It does not really matter what we do tonight. The public know in their heart of hearts what is right, and I believe that they are right.

The well-known phrase that Saint Paul wrote in Corinthians was quite clear. He believed—writing all those years ago—that those who indulged in such behaviour

"will not inherit the kingdom of God".

There is no need to emphasise that, because people know that writing well. I mention that in this debate only because a Dutch MP who quoted that well-known phrase was subsequently prosecuted in the Dutch courts, because he was said to be indulging in discriminatory language. I hope that, in this country, we are not embarked on the road that leads to our prosecuting those who quote sacred texts that may be out of fashion—out of tune with current thinking. That is not happening in this country yet, but it has happened in Holland.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend certainly should not be castigated for invoking Christianity, but does he accept that the argument that he is developing appears to be a case against allowing homosexuality at all, rather than specifically, and limitedly, against the terms of the Bill?

Mr. Leigh: My hon. Friend knows where I come from, and he knows my views. One must compromise. I thought that the law that we had before was perfectly satisfactory. We cannot go back in time. If adults in their 20s, 30s and 40s wish to do something in private, we cannot prosecute them and drag them before the criminal courts. I know that. I am a realist.

We had a satisfactory compromise. We all agreed that once people were grown up and had firmly decided that they wanted to engage in a certain activity, they were not to be prosecuted for it. Why is it necessary for Parliament to continue to advance against the deeply held religious and moral views of the bulk of society? Why are we doing that? Why is it necessary?

It is said, particularly by my hon. Friend the Member for Witney, who laboured the point, that the subject is a great moral issue, and that people who express the views that I am expressing are somehow like those who advocated the slave trade. I did not understand his argument. I think that he was trying to say that people who advocate my point of view are just the sort of people who used to oppose legislation that outlawed discrimination on the grounds of race or gender.

However, our point is entirely different. I shall quote General Colin Powell, the first black chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff. He said:

"Unlike race or gender, sexuality is not a benign trait. It is manifested by behaviour. While it would be decidedly biased to assume certain behaviours based on gender or membership in a particular racial group, the same is not true for sexuality."

Our point is that we cannot help our race or gender. If I throw scorn on my hon. Friend because of his race or gender, I am rightly condemned by Parliament, but surely I have a right to condemn something that is not to do with his race or gender, but is manifested by his behaviour.

What we are discussing is fundamentally a matter of choice. I know that it is argued by many hon. Members that the homosexual gene is inside some people. Of course I accept that. Some of my best friends are homosexuals. *[Laughter.]* Why do hon. Members laugh? I know from close friends of mine that homosexuality is inherent. It is not something to which they came by chance or by influence after the age of 16.

We are talking about boys—they are still boys at 16—and girls. Let us get this straight. Let us talk straight language. *[Interruption.]* That may be an unfortunate phrase. We are talking about men being allowed to bugger boys and girls who are aged 16. Nobody likes speaking such language, but that is what the Bill is about. If Parliament thinks that boys and girls at that age should be treated like that, I do not know what Parliament is coming to.

Mr. Bradshaw: I apologise to the hon. Gentleman for laughing. He had just spent some time trying to draw a distinction between homophobia and racism, when he trotted out the same sort of comment that we always heard from racists—"Some of my best friends are black."

Mr. Leigh: I do not know how that advances the hon. Gentleman's case. I thought that I was advancing a perfectly justifiable argument based on the fact that people can choose to indulge or not to indulge in the activity under discussion. They cannot choose their race or their gender. I therefore say that the argument of my hon. Friend the Member for Witney—who unfortunately is no longer with us, no doubt for good reasons—was fundamentally flawed and was not acceptable.

Dr. Harris: There is a gaping hole in the hon. Gentleman's argument. He said that it is feasible to discriminate against homosexuals because they choose their behaviour, yet a moment later he said that homosexuality was inherent. On that basis, it would be reasonable to discriminate against a practising Jew, as opposed to one who just happened to inherit that racial characteristic. The hon. Gentleman's entire argument is nonsensical.

Mr. Leigh: We shall have to agree to differ. I was not trying to take an absolutist point of view. I do not accept

what is often said by the other side—that homosexuality is always inherent. The hon. Member for Colne Valley said that homosexuality was like eye colour—one was born with it. I have never accepted that it is acquired in the womb, but, for the sake of argument, I will accept that for certain people, homosexuality is inherent, but not for all.

My point is that the age of 16 is an extremely vulnerable age. It is well known that many young boys go through a narcissistic or a homosexual phase, during which they are easily influenced. Do we, as a Parliament, want to give the message to those young people that, before they are fully mature, while they are still 16 years old, advantage can be taken of them?

Kali Mountford: I accept the hon. Gentleman's view that a person's sexuality is not necessarily inherent, but how does criminalising behaviour that seems natural to those taking part in it advance our society or the law?

Mr. Leigh: I agree that it would be worrying if large numbers of mature people in society were engaging in a particular activity, and were criminalised and sent to prison. However, how many 16-year-olds are we sending to prison for engaging in consensual homosexual activity? The answer, of course, is none.

Let us be realistic about the debate. We are about sending messages. Hon. Members who support the Bill know that in their hearts. The message that they want to get across is that Parliament says that there is no moral distinction between homosexual and heterosexual behaviour. That is what the debate is about, and I accept that the Bill will be passed tonight.

Once that has happened, the pressure will then shift to a campaign to allow homosexuals to adopt children, for clause 28 to be repealed, and for legal marriage between homosexuals. That is the agenda. It is not just I who say so. My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) has a little pink, or red, booklet produced by Stonewall, which lists the demands. We should not think for a moment that, once the Bill is passed, the agenda will not move on. The booklet refers to equal recognition for young lesbians, gays and bisexuals in our schools. That is the agenda.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: In addition to the aspirations set out in the booklet, there is literature pre-dating this debate which shows that some people want to reduce the age further, from 16 to 14, and that this is merely the thin end of the wedge. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Mr. Leigh: I accept that, for many people, although not for all, that would be the agenda.

Strangely, even after tonight, the law will still express a view not just on the matters about which we have spoken in the past minute or two, but on the offence that we are discussing. The Sexual Offences Act 1956 refers to homosexuality—buggery—as an unnatural activity. That will remain on the statute book, but of course the young will not read "Halsbury's Statutes". The message emanating from the House will be that there is no distinction between homosexual and heterosexual behaviour.

A further reason why I oppose the Bill relates to vulnerability. It is said that the Bill will go a long way to redress the law and provide extra protection, but the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) has been sold a pup. What we are discussing tonight is a much weaker proposal than what he proposed last year. As I said in response to an earlier intervention, the Home Office, which has been slow in pushing this proposal forward, accepts that there will be only 10 or 15 prosecutions. That point was made in good intervention by the hon. Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) right at the beginning of our debate. If someone is occasionally in authority, such as a vicar or a scout leader, rather than permanently in authority, he or she will not be covered by this legislation.

The weakest part of our argument concerns the health risks. I say that because it is not for me to lecture people if they want to indulge in a fundamentally unhealthy activity. If people want to smoke, it is none of my business. People need not listen to me, but they should listen to the Terence Higgins Trust, a body trusted by the homosexual lobby, which says that one in five gay men in London is HIV positive. No fewer than 871 gay men died from Aids in the last recorded year.

Dr. Julian Lewis: What causes the disproportion in the prevalence of HIV among gay men? I am not talking about Africa, where other factors come into play. What can be the cause be, other than anal sex? Has my hon. Friend or anyone else any idea?

Mr. Leigh: No. We are now entering a debate that embarrasses many of us. However, it must be said that anal sex is a fundamentally dangerous activity because the Almighty did not design that part of the anatomy for that purpose. Any doctor would say the same. We are passing a Bill that permits that activity. Had Parliament debated 50 or so years ago a Bill that allowed men to bugger 16-year-old girls and boys, people would have thought that the devil was abroad. It may be old fashioned to talk about the devil, but I wonder whether he is lurking somewhere because these proposals are so extraordinary—so totally outwith what the public want. They are designed to increase ill health among the population.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): The Bill is always described as "reducing the age of consent", which sounds perfectly acceptable, but has it occurred to my hon. Friend that, if the description were to go on to list the acts in question, that would put a different complexion on the matter?

Mr. Leigh: We are all too polite to mention such things. We do not like talking about them because we are all embarrassed about sex. If something that an hon. Member did in his past were thrown back at him in this Chamber, he would go bright red in the face. None of us wants to discuss the matter, but let us at least be honest. Let us not hold ourselves up as being morally virtuous, but let us have the courage to say what is right. Just because Members of Parliament stand up in this Chamber and say that adultery or homosexuality is wrong, it does not mean that they never fail; it simply means that they have the courage to stand up for what is right and good. That is why I shall vote against the Bill tonight.

7.4 pm

Mr. David Borrow (South Ribble): When Leo Abse's Bill was passed in 1967, I was a grammar school boy in a small town in west Yorkshire. Although I was only in

[Mr. David Borrow]

my early teens, I was aware of the kerfuffle that it caused. In the subsequent years, like many other young school boys at that time, I had to struggle with coming to terms with my sexuality. During the sixth form and my years at university, I eventually concluded that I was gay, but I knew that, despite the 1967 Act, I was still considered a criminal if I acted on the feelings and instincts that were fundamental to me.

About 10 years later, in the late 1970s, when I was convenor of the Preston group of the Campaign for Homosexual Equality, I went to lobby three local Members of Parliament: Ron Atkins, then the hon. Member for Preston, North, who is still a friend and colleague—I served for 10 years as a councillor with him in Preston; Stan Thorne, the then hon. Member for Preston, South, who became my MP in 1983 when the boundary changed; and George Rodgers, the then hon. Member for Chorley, whose constituency included the town of Leyland, which is now part of my constituency.

The positive reaction that I received from those three Members of Parliament led me to believe that it would not be too long before we moved on from the 1967 Act to equality in the age of consent. I did not imagine then that more than 30 years later, the issue would still be unresolved and that it would fall to me to put the case for equality in the Chamber.

We need the change for a number of reasons, the first and most important of which is equality. No one can argue convincingly that a 16 or 17-year-old male is old enough to father a child, but not to decide whether to have a sexual partner of the same sex. If it is fair to discriminate, for whatever reason, against homosexuality, why does the law discriminate against male but not female homosexuals? The age of consent is not 18 for female homosexuals.

I want equality between men and women, and between heterosexuals and homosexuals. This proposal is to make the age of consent 16, and I shall support it on the basis of equality. I have yet to hear a valid argument—in this Chamber tonight or several months ago, when I sat through the whole debate, or in the other place in the early summer—for why the existing discrimination should continue.

The second reason why we should reform the law relates to criminality. As I said earlier in the debate, the existing legislation makes criminals of 16 and 17-year-old males who have sex with members of their own sex. It does not protect them. I wonder whether Conservative Members who have spoken strongly against a change would want to see the existing law enforced if their sons or grandsons were on the receiving end. Only a handful of cases involving 16 or 17-year-olds have been brought to court under the present legislation, and even fewer have resulted in convictions because most people instinctively know that it neither protects nor helps a young person to make a criminal of him at that age.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Will the hon. Gentleman answer the question that I put earlier to my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward), which he signally failed to answer? How will he defend any age of consent that may be agreed today against the arguments of those who want it lowered to 15, 14 or even younger, given his argument that no one should ever be "criminalised" for having a relationship below a given age of consent?

Mr. Borrow: My first point related to equality; I want equality in the age of consent. Criminality is the second point in the argument for reform; the existing law on the heterosexual age of consent protects heterosexuals below the age of consent. Boys and girls under 16 who have consensual sex are not subject to criminal prosecution. If they have consensual sex with a partner above the age of consent, that partner may be subject to criminal conviction, but the law protects heterosexual young people who are below the age of consent.

One of the flaws in this measure is that it will still leave males under the age of 16 technically open to criminal prosecution in the event of a consensual sexual relationship with someone of their own age.

Mr. Robathan: The hon. Gentleman asked Conservative Members about the issue of criminality. It is unwise to personalise things in respect of whether one would be concerned about one's son or grandchildren. I have a son, however, and when he reaches the age of 16 I would, of course, want to protect that child as much as possible. If a man aged 40 were to have a homosexual relationship with him, I would want that man to be prosecuted. Indeed, should I have a daughter aged 16, I would be pretty unhappy about a relationship with a man aged 40.

Mr. Borrow: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. As a father, he feels that a 40-year-old man who had an affair with his 16-year-old daughter would under existing law—which there is no proposal to change—suffer no penalty, although a 40-year-old man who had a sexual relationship with a 16-year-old male would suffer a penalty. I want equality, and there is no reason why 16-year-old males need the benefit of protection any more than 16-year-old females.

I return to the issue of criminality. I wonder what happens day to day—in institutions such as public schools, or on camping trips or trips to youth hostels—when schoolteachers or youth leaders come across young men of 16 or 17 engaged in consensual sex. Parents will occasionally discover their sons in an embarrassing situation. Youth leaders, schoolteachers and parents do not suddenly say about a member of a youth group, their student or their son, "He has been involved in criminal activity, so I'll ring up the local bobbies and get them to come down to arrest him, because that is what he needs." That is not what most people would think was appropriate. For that reason, the number of prosecutions is so low.

Dr. Lewis: It is zero.

Mr. Borrow: If it is zero, what is the point of keeping on the statute book legislation that could criminalise 16 and 17-year-old males, but is never used, even though we

all know that the law is breached and that sexual activity among 16 and 17-year-old males goes on, probably every day of the year, without prosecutions taking place?

Dr. Lewis: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Borrow: I will take another intervention from the hon. Gentleman.

Dr. Lewis: The answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is surely that he misunderstands the role of the age of consent. The purpose of the age of consent is not to criminalise people below it, but to protect people below it by criminalising the activities of people above it. The fact that nobody below it is prosecuted should reassure the people below it; we do not want to reassure the predators above the age of consent by lowering it.

Mr. Borrow: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman has yet again failed to listen to the debate. The existing law, as defended by him, criminalises 16 and 17-year-old males. That is the law that this House passed; if we do not amend it in the weeks ahead, as it goes through the parliamentary sausage machine, that will remain the situation as we approach the end of this century.

Dr. Harris: Will the hon. Gentleman accept from me that, although they are certainly criminalised, 16 and 17-year-olds are also prosecuted under this law? We know that in Bolton, a male aged 17 and a half was prosecuted for having consensual sex with his boy friend, convicted and sentenced. Such prosecutions are happening this year and they happened last year. I agree entirely with the hon. Gentleman that they must not be allowed to happen again.

Mr. Borrow: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Conservative Members have said that there are no prosecutions or convictions; I am well aware of the Bolton case of the 17-year-old who was prosecuted successfully for having consensual sex, which makes nonsense of some of the comments from Conservative Members.

Thirdly, we should make a change because of the extent to which the existing law helps to stigmatise young homosexual men, makes their lives more difficult, encourages prejudice and hostility and makes it more difficult for them to get on with their lives. Reducing the age of consent to 16 would send to those young men the important message that they have a valued place within our society and a role to play, rather than the message that they are inferior beings, as some Conservative Members may want to show.

Mr. Gray: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Borrow: I shall take one more intervention.

Mr. Gray: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He is right to say that, to some degree, homosexuals aged 16 are stigmatised and currently can be criminalised. If the Bill is passed, homosexuals aged 15 years and 11 months would similarly be stigmatised and, as he correctly described, would also be criminalised. Does he accept that his argument favours the removal of any age of consent whatever? If his objections to criminalising 15-year-olds for homosexual activity are to be believed, presumably he will have to vote against the Bill on the ground that it would criminalise exactly the people who he wants to be non-criminals?

Mr. Borrow: The question of prejudice and stigma is why it is so important to have an equal age of consent. That message of equality sends to young men the right signal—the important signal—that they are not lesser beings because of their sexuality. I shall come to points that have been made in the debate, in a number of documents and in meetings that I have had in my constituency about the Bill.

The fact that opinion polls show strong opposition among the population at large to changing the age of consent was mentioned earlier. I have had a number of meetings with constituents who have argued that I should vote against the Bill. They have generally done so on the basis that they want to protect young men. They somehow believe that the existing law protects young men and that changing it would mean that young men were no longer protected. The existing law criminalises young men; it does not protect them. If it were enforced rigorously, rather than protecting young men, it would bring many of them through the courts.

Part of the issue of protection rests on the basis that some young men are not entirely sure about their sexuality. All the evidence suggests that most gay men have their first sexual experiences at about the same age as most heterosexual young men—if anything, a few months later, but at about the same age, about the age of 16. I have seen various figures, ranging from just under 16 to just under 17, but statistics are statistics.

Young men who may be unsure of their sexuality are not helped by having their private sexual goings-on dragged through the courts and publicised. It may well be that some young men will engage in same-sex activities at the age of 16 and 17, and will end up happily married with kids, feeling that they are heterosexual later in life. I must tell Conservative Members that I know plenty of men and women who felt that they were heterosexual, or ought to be, at 16 and 17, and who now have children as a result.

On both sides of the divide, there is an element involving a small number of people whose sexuality is not definite as they grow up. We must ask ourselves whether criminalising young men for engaging in same-sex relationships at the age of 16 and 17 makes it easier or more difficult to go through a period of uncertainty. I am certain that it makes it more difficult. I am certain that, if I asked parents in my constituency whether, if they discovered their 16 or 17-year-old son in bed with the lad next door, it would be a good idea to call the police and take them through the courts, the answer would be, "No. We must support and help our son. If he ends up being gay for the rest of his life, we will support him, and if it is a phase, we will help him through that". No instinct would lead a parent to say that it was a good idea to bring in the law.

Another argument that has been advanced relates to health. I have received a leaflet from the Christian Institute entitled "Gay Pressure on the Young", which includes many claims that the Bill should not proceed because of the higher prevalence of AIDS among gay men, as against the rest of the community. AIDS is a disease, which does not discriminate on the basis of

[Mr. Borrow]

whether people are gay or heterosexual. In north America and Europe, most transmission has been among gay men; worldwide, the vast majority has been in the heterosexual community.

If documents such as that seek to prove that the fact that the prevalence of AIDS in the United Kingdom is greater among gay men is something to hold against gay men, and something with which to foster prejudice against them, will they use the same arguments against black people, on the basis that most cases worldwide, and the areas of highest prevalence of AIDS in any community, are in the black African community—particularly east Africa? Those cases occur through heterosexual transmission.

Mrs. Gorman: That point was made earlier in the debate. It is a fact that, where AIDS is quite common among females as well as males, it is because anal sex is practised as a form of contraception. It is practised widely in Africa and extremely widely in Romania, which explains the prevalence of AIDS there. I do not want to mention all the biological details, but those are the facts.

Mr. Bradshaw: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think it is better for the hon. Member for South Ribble (Mr. Borrow) to deal with one intervention before he deals with another.

Mr. Borrow: I do not know on what basis the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) made her comments, but my understanding is that transmission in Africa is by vaginal rather than anal sex, and I know of no basis for what she has said.

May I make a general point? I am a member of the all-party parliamentary group on AIDS and, in the early summer, spent several weeks taking evidence on a number of parliamentary hearings to produce a report entitled "A Strategy for AIDS". I hope that it will form the basis of discussions that are currently taking place in Government.

The all-party group included parliamentarians who voted against the proposal to lower the age of consent last summer, but the unanimous finding of all who were present for the hearings was that the existing age of consent—the age of 18—constituted a barrier to the obtaining of proper health information and promotion by young gay men. That finding has been backed by my hon. Friends who have spoken earlier today, and by the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward); it has also been supported by the British Medical Association, and by many other medical organisations and children's charities.

With the age of consent at 18, it is very difficult for many who are involved in the provision of advice on sexual health to give that advice to 16 and 17-year-old males under the age of consent, whether they are teachers, youth workers or medical health workers. I do not argue that we should change the law because the all-party group on AIDS felt that the existing age of consent constituted a barrier to getting information across. I am saying to those—in the House or outside—who are using AIDS and all the issues surrounding it as a reason for opposing this measure that there is no foundation for their stance. I believe that the employment of such statistics feeds prejudice—the sort of prejudice that I remember in the mid-1980s, and the sort of prejudice that I thought and hoped had eased in the last 10 years.

Mr. Bradshaw: Can we deal once and for all with the question of transmission in sub-Saharan Africa? HIV and AIDS are spread in sub-Saharan Africa predominantly through vaginal sexual intercourse. They are spread more easily there than in the west because of poverty and the prevalence of other sexually transmitted diseases, which make the transmission of HIV much easier.

Mr. Borrow: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. As for the issue of AIDS generally, I listened carefully to the comments of the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler), who is not present now. He was at the heart of Government when the AIDS epidemic started, and was responsible for many of the measures that were adopted then. I hope that, when the debate ends, he will give some thought to the evidence that is available about the way in which AIDS prevention is made more difficult by his support for the existing age of consent. I hope that he will think about that before he decides how to vote.

I hope that, as the right hon. Gentleman has used experience in terms of the AIDS epidemic to support his position, in the light of information of which he was obviously not aware at the beginning of the debate, he will reconsider his position and, instead of supporting the view that 18 is the right age, accept that all the information and evidence on AIDS goes the other way and supports a lowering of the age of consent.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: I do not wish to prolong the hon. Gentleman's speech unduly, but what he has said contradicts the facts. The same argument was deployed in 1994 when the decision was taken to reduce the age of consent from 21 to 18. It was then said that doing so would enable young people to have advice on safer sex and all the rest of it, and reduce the level of HIV infection. The reality was different. Between 1995 and 1996, HIV infections among homosexual men increased by 11 per cent. His argument is completely flawed.

Mr. Borrow: Having peaked, the number of new HIV infections among gay men is now declining. The number of gay men in the United Kingdom who have the virus or the disease is increasing because treatment has become much more effective, and more and more gay men who have been infected by the virus are living. That has led to an overall increase in the number within the population.

One or two Opposition Members touched on the Christian belief that homosexuality is wrong. My understanding is that, in both the Catholic Church and Church of England, there is an acceptance that human sexuality is not a matter of choice, but something that people come to learn about themselves.

It is on that basis that within the Anglican communion—it happens in significant numbers—clergymen who are homosexual by inclination are accepted into the priesthood if they remain celibate. There is an acceptance that gay men have no choice in their sexuality, but the Church, because its teaching is that sex should take place only within marriage and that marriage can take place only between a man and a woman, says that sinless sex can take place only within marriage.

I accept and understand that argument, but, if the major Churches argue that sex should take place only between a man and a woman within marriage, I am somewhat perplexed that the Churches do not argue that we should bring the criminal law into adultery and into sexual relationships outside marriage. I respect the Churches for holding that position, but I question seriously why, in their submissions to many people—I accept that the Churches are divided on the issue—they argue so strongly that legislation should discriminate and be prejudicial towards gay men. The Churches do not make similar strong arguments against sex between heterosexual couples outside marriage.

I was brought up as an Anglican. In the past 20 or 30 years, my religious observance has varied according to the extent to which I felt welcome within the church to which I went. At the moment, I feel less than welcome within the Church of England. That saddens me.

The main reason why hon. Members argue—*[Interruption.]* We have until 10 o'clock. The main reason why Members argue against a change in the law is because of prejudice.

Mr. Bermingham: Has my hon. Friend not read the European Court's decision in the Sutherland and Morris case? In reality, there is no argument about the age of consent or homosexuality, legal or not. The argument on the Bill must surely be whether the protection for that group of vulnerable persons between 16 and 18 is adequate.

Mr. Borrow: I recognise the point that my hon. Friend makes, but the bulk of the correspondence and representations that I have received, and much of the emphasis in the debate, has been on the age of consent, rather than the protection that is afforded to 16 and 17-year-old males and females. There is scope for further discussion on that part of the Bill, but I recognise its importance and the fact that it goes a long way towards dealing with supporters of the existing legislation—rather than the revised legislation—who want to keep the age of consent at 18 on the basis that that protects people.

The measures that have been introduced by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary strengthen the age of consent legislation, but it is important not to view the Bill simply in terms of sexuality. We should recognise that, through these measures, we are protecting both young men and young women from unwarranted sexual attention by whoever.

I touch on what I think is at the heart of much of the opposition. It centres on the argument that equality of the age of consent will undermine family life. Families are made up in various ways, but every homosexual man or woman is part of a family. Every homosexual man or woman comes from a family, and depends on the love and support within that family. The argument that giving rights to homosexuals undermines the family is totally fallacious.

Over the past 30 years, there has been a big increase in the number of family breakdowns. I find it difficult to believe that that increase is because more gay men and women are choosing to live openly as gay and to settle down with their partners, rather than, as they would have done 30 years ago, getting married to hide their sexuality, or having a public face as single people, but keeping a part of themselves hidden away, somehow shameful and dark.

Over the past 20-odd years, I have noticed the extent to which gay men and women have been successful in living a more open life style, building relationships and having partnerships that can, in many cases, last many more years than marriages. I have a significant number of friends who have been in relationships for 30 or 40 years. The Bill and other measures to combat prejudice and remove discrimination against gay people will make it easier for young men and women growing up now to plan and live their lives openly, which was not possible for those who are 20 or 30 years older than me. They will be able to plan long-term relationships and feel that they can play a full and open part in the wider community.

Contemporaries of mine when I was growing up who did not have as supportive a family as I had were kicked out of their home and ostracised by their family. The same happens now, but not to the same extent. Those young people were treated badly in that way because of the climate of prejudice and hatred. We must send a signal that prejudice and hatred have no place in our society and that everyone has the right and opportunity to play a full part in our community.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I appreciate that there are some deeply considered views to be put forward in the debate, but I suggest that a little urgency might now be injected into it. A large number of hon. Members still want to contribute, and at the present rate not all of them will succeed in catching my eye. I call Mr. Edward Leigh; I am sorry, Mr. Andrew Robathan. It was not my intention to give the hon. Member for Gainsborough double rations.

7.42 pm

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I shall be a great deal briefer than the hon. Member for South Ribble (Mr. Borrow). As he showed, the Bill is a triumph—a triumph for the persistence of single-issue pressure groups and political correctness. There is no huge demand in the country for a change. We have heard about opinion polls, but I do not want to dwell on them. There are deeply held beliefs on both sides. The only letters and telephone calls that I have received have been from those who oppose the Bill, but I know that I have constituents who would like it to pass.

I have received several briefings, some of which, from both sides, I have thought erroneous. The best bit of rubbish that I have had arrived this morning from the National AIDS Trust, which said:

"equalising the age of consent for homosexual sex will have significant health promotion benefits for young gay men . . . In this sense, an equal age of consent recognises young people's basic right to health."

I understand that there are strongly held principles involved, but I have to disagree with that.

I also received a letter this morning from Lady Hayman thanking me for responding to her appeal to give blood, which I did a couple of weeks ago in Leicester. There was a shortage of blood and she wanted a higher profile for the National Blood Service. To those who say that this is not a health issue, I must point out that there is no equality in giving blood. The politically incorrect advice from the National Blood Service says:

"You should never give blood if you are a man who has had sex with another man".

No one can say that male homosexual intercourse is judged to be equivalent in health terms.

[Mr. Andrew Robathan]

I understand the wish of the hon. Member for South Ribble to stress the case for equality. Stonewall's submission opens with the words:

"Our case is the case for equality."

That is the core of the argument for changing the law. However, there is no equality between homosexual and heterosexual intercourse. Neither biologically nor physically can the acts be equated. I would add that there is no moral equivalence, but apparently in these morally ambivalent times legislators are not allowed to suggest that an act might be right or wrong.

We are debating what protection the law should give to children, and what children should be allowed to do. That is not just my opinion, but that of United Kingdom law. The Children Act 1989 says:

"A child is a boy or girl under the age of 18."

In international law, the United Nations convention on the rights of the child says that

"A child means every human being below the age of 18 years."

It is perfectly reasonable to say children should be allowed to do this or that without being protected, but we should know exactly what we are debating.

Leaving aside the moral opinion of people like me, and even the teachings of Christianity and other religions, the Government seem to be ignoring even their own focus groups. Opinion polls suggest that between three fifths and three quarters of people in this country do not want the age of consent to be reduced. It would be easy to condemn such a proportion of the population as homophobes, but on this occasion the ordinary British public show a great deal of common sense.

Mr. Gordon Marsden (Blackpool, South): The hon. Gentleman is attempting to make a case based on public opinion. He said earlier that there was no huge public demand for the reform—an assertion which in any case I dispute. Would he say that the lack of a huge public demand for the abolition of bear baiting or public hanging meant that those measures should not have been enacted? The hon. Gentleman is in error when he talks about a vast tide of public opinion in this country against the reform. A Gallup poll in July last year for *The Daily Telegraph*—*The Daily Telegraph*, note—found that 42 per cent. believed that homosexual acts were morally equivalent rather than morally inferior to heterosexual acts. Only 39 per cent. disagreed. Whatever else the Great British public think about the issue, they are not giving carte blanche to the hon. Gentleman and his argument.

Mr. Robathan: The hon. Gentleman, in his rather long intervention, tries to put words into my mouth. I did not say that there was a great groundswell of opinion against the measure; when asked, however, people almost invariably say that they do not think that the law should be changed. People to whom I have talked and those who respond to opinion polls do not accept that the two acts are equivalent.

The general view, and mine—the hon. Member for Blackpool, South (Mr. Marsden) may agree with me on this—is that what people get up to in the privacy of their own bedroom is largely their own affair. However, the Great British public do not wish to see boys threatened by predatory older men. The hon. Member for South Ribble did not address that. I should be appalled if, when my son is 16, a 40-year-old man seduced him. Surely that is a widely held view.

It is not homophobic to oppose the Bill. "Homophobe" must be one of the most contrived words to have entered our language recently. Common sense says that there is a difference between homosexual and heterosexual relationships. Society and the law should point that out. By reducing the age of consent, Parliament will be telling young people that there is no difference, which is contrary to logic and biology. That may encourage more of the confused young men, to whom the hon. Member for South Ribble, who is no longer in his place, referred, into homosexual relationships. We will be saying that society is ambivalent on the issue. We should be encouraging all young people to show more self-restraint.

When I was a child, I used to put money into a box shaped like a house, provided by Barnardos. The purpose was to encourage people such as me, from a relatively privileged background, to help those from less privileged backgrounds. Sadly, Barnardos seems to have abrogated its responsibilities to give guidance to young people—if the quotation that I have from a spokesperson is correct. It says:

"We find ourselves in the ludicrous situation of handing out condoms to girls who are 16, to heterosexual boys who are 16, but not to gay 16-year-olds".

It would be better if Barnados encouraged and taught abstinence and self-control in all 16-year-olds in their care. I shall not be giving my son one of those little Barnardos boxes.

Last year's debate, in which the amendment of the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) was defeated, revealed the true wishes of the House. I am not sure whether there was a payroll vote, but I note that the Home Secretary voted against the amendment.

The Government have been let off the hook by the House of Lords, in that they are now introducing an extremely weak exemption clause for teachers and others. Most people outside this House would be appalled at the idea of any teacher having an affair with a child in his care. However, only last year, this House refused to provide such protection for children. I am delighted to say that even the politically correct in the Government baulked slightly at that.

We hear a lot from the Government about strengthening the family. This Bill does nothing to strengthen the family, as even the most absurd Labour Member must admit. The Bill will further undermine family life. It is bound to be passed tonight, with a large majority of the politically correct. Few outside this place will think that British society will be better as a result.

7.50 pm

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): I propose not to be long. I hope to set an example that others will follow, rather than follow the example that I have been set. The Bill is very simple. Whether homosexuality is good or bad is not the issue; it is not in the Bill. It is decided by Parliament, and by the European courts. What the age of consent should be is not the issue; it is decided by others.

On 1 January 2000, we become a party to the European convention on human rights. In the case of Sutherland and Morris, the courts have said that a deal must be done, so the one way to stop our law being condemned is to pass the relevant section of the Bill. There is nothing we can do about that. We waste time arguing about it.

We should be looking at a far more important issue—the protection of the handicapped, the mentally disabled and the youngsters who are in a position where they trust the older persons around them. I was the main supporter of the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) last time we debated this issue, and I spoke in the debate. I said then that what mattered was the protection of those in disadvantaged positions who had to take and abide by the rules, guidance, orders and instructions of their elders and betters: the teacher, the scoutmaster, the priest, the vicar, the doctor—I could go on ad nauseam.

One does not have to be very old to realise that, in the children's homes of this country, exploitation of the young has been rampant over the years. We have never had the guts to admit it. In Cheshire, an inquiry has been going on for ages. Kincora in Northern Ireland is another example. Various public school masters who exploited their children have been prosecuted. There have been examples of exploitation up and down the land—in Leicester, Newcastle and all over the place.

We are talking not just about youngsters of 10, 11, 12 or 13, but often of 15, 16 and 17. Those of us who tabled the amendment last year sought to protect those youngsters. In an intervention on the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), I indicated that the Bill proposed a maximum two-year sentence. What are we talking about in terms of the abuse of a child? Anal sex? Rape? Indecent assault? We are talking about all the things that we should never allow a child to suffer at any age. We must never allow a child in a position of dependency to be exploited.

As a practising lawyer, I have dealt with hundreds of such cases over the years. Time and time again we read of the persuasiveness of those involved. "I will just help you here. Would you like a treat of this sort or that?" It is slimy, miserable and horrible, and it ruins the lives of children not just for a year or two, but for ever.

Those of us who supported the amendment to the Crime and Disorder Bill thought that we would achieve something. We cannot beat the law, or the European courts. We cannot stop the reality of equality, but let us protect the vulnerable. In a case of which I am aware—I shall not name names, or say where it is—mentally handicapped children of 16 and 17 were treated to the pictures or a visit to the shopping market. What was the payment? Sex. Can we tolerate that? No.

The sentence proposed by the Bill in terms of 16 and 17-year-olds will be two years. That means one year, because of time off for good behaviour. The offender will no sooner be tried than he will be out. Is that a deterrent to the paedophile or the slimeball? Not on your life.

If the offender was prosecuted for indecent assault—with a maximum sentence of 10 years—it would become a deterrent. If he was prosecuted for rape—with a maximum sentence of life—it would become a deterrent. If he was prosecuted for anal sex—with a sentence of 20 years to life—it would become a deterrent. That is how the Bill should have been drafted. Someone who is in a position of trust, and abuses that trust by misusing the person in his care or under his control, should be prosecuted for the offence.

I say to Home Office Ministers that I cannot support the Bill until the proper penalties are put in. When that is done, I will support it. It is not my job to be the moral conscience of this country. I have lost that argument too often in the past, and I know that I would lose it again. I would lose it in the courts today, and we will lose it in the European courts. That argument is over. Now let us protect the children.

7.56 pm

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I broadly welcome the Bill. I was one of the six sponsors of the amendment to the Crime and Disorder Bill which brought the issue of the age of consent to the House. I was proud to be one, just as I am proud now to associate myself with the speech of the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward). He made almost all the points that could be made in support of clause 1, and I do not intend to repeat them.

I warmly endorse everything the hon. Member for Witney said. Indeed, he has done many hon. Members a favour. If they receive letters from constituents on this matter, they can do no better than to associate themselves with his speech and pass it on to their constituents. It was eloquent, and superb in many ways.

I regret that the measure that I backed was lost in another place, but it was predictable, given the time limits. It was not unreasonable for the other place to express its opinion once, although I disagreed violently with many, if not all, of the arguments made to defeat the views of this House. It was inevitable that it would take more than one pass at the House of Lords to get the measure through. The timing of the original measure was unfortunate, at best, and reckless, at worst, as it did not have the time to go back to the House of Lords to enable them to think again.

I respect the courage of those in the other place who spoke eloquently in defence of the reduction in the age of consent—particularly the Bishop of Bath and Wells, who made it clear that there were views both for and against the measure from those who described themselves as Christians.

Given what I am going to say about the need for wider law reform in terms of homosexuality, it may be appropriate at this point—the historic Second Reading of a Government Bill on the age of consent—to pay tribute to people who have campaigned for far longer than I have in support of this move; people like Antony Grey and Allan Horsfall of the Campaign for Homosexuality Equality, the former of whom received an award recently from the gay press for his long campaigning work. When progress is made—I hope for wider progress than the limited measures in the Bill—this legislation will stand as testimony to their campaigning and that of organisations such as Stonewall.

I am delighted to see that the hon. Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng) is the Minister in charge of the Bill. He has a proud tradition of working against discrimination against the gay community; that has been well recorded in the gay press and elsewhere. I broadly welcome both parts of the Bill, but I hope that he will accept the few caveats that I have to offer.

[Dr. Evan Harris]

Clause 1, which reduces the age of consent, contains shortfalls that I hope to be able to examine in Committee, and I hope that the Government will accept amendments. The hon. Member for South Ribble (Mr. Borrow) mentioned the fact that the Bill still criminalises the victim. Clause 1 is a lost opportunity to decriminalise the victim and protect the young.

The law will still not treat homosexual and heterosexual offences equally, because there is no statutory defence for homosexuals. For heterosexual offences, it can be argued that the accused did not realise that they were committing an offence because they were misled or were not in a position to know the age of the person with whom they were having a sexual relationship; but the Bill makes no such provision for homosexual sex, and that is discriminatory. Gross discrimination also remains in sentencing, and people who are no longer considered guilty of an offence will still be subject to inclusion on the sex offenders register, in a prospective way, from the point of enactment onwards.

The Bill was an opportunity to make more than the limited, but historic and welcome, change that it makes. The Government were forced to act by the findings of the European Court of Human Rights in the Sutherland and Morris cases, which suggested that if they did not act they would be in breach of the European convention on human rights, to which we are a signatory and which, in a laudable step, the Government incorporated into British law.

I hope that the Government will take further action; otherwise there may be further instances of Britain being brought before the European Court of Human Rights or being found to be in breach of British law after the incorporation of the convention. I fear that the Home Secretary's declaration that the Bill is compatible with the convention and with the Human Rights Act 1998 will be open to debate, and, on closer scrutiny, I do not believe that it can be sustained.

Sexual offences law is a complex matter, and I am glad that the Government have issued details of the review, but significant problems remain. The current law and the Bill fail to protect the victim—the young man, in the case of homosexual sex—and he will be a criminal by the very same act that makes him a victim. That may be unique in British law, and it cannot be right if we seek to protect the younger party.

As Conservative Members have said, perhaps not deliberately, it cannot be right that, if we seek to protect the party who is below the age of consent, the Bill does not contain a simple provision to ensure that that party cannot be prosecuted and criminalised. The Tyrell principle applies to girls; there can be no prosecution of a consenting girl for aiding and abetting under section 6 of the Sexual Offences Act 1956, which concerns unlawful sexual intercourse, even though there may be cases in which a girl under the age of 16 has been the instigator.

For there to be equality, and for Britain not to be found once again to be subject to sanction under the European convention and the Human Rights Act 1998, that provision needs to be built in. The hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) made the point that his daughter can do as she pleases at the age of 16 but that boys over 16 will still be in fear of criminal sanction even if they are the victim of a crime under the law relating to the age of consent.

Stonewall says:

"Simply amending the 1967 Act to replace '18' with '16' would leave this flawed structure"—

of the differential laws—

"in place. A gay 15 year old would still be criminalised if he had sex, although of course a 15 year old girl would not."

Mr. Bermingham: Currently, when a girl under 16 has sexual intercourse with a man under 23, there is that statutory defence—I agree that the same defence should apply for homosexual acts—but there is also a provision in English law that says that one cannot give evidence if one is going to incriminate oneself; so in such a case the young man would immediately be warned by the judge that he need not give any evidence at all. That is his protection.

Dr. Harris: But in that protection lies, in a sense, protection of the offender. Labour Members have said that if there is fear of prosecution and criminalisation of the victim, that victim is less likely to report the offence. I know that the hon. Gentleman feels strongly about the protection of minors, and I share that feeling. It is vital to ensure that victims are not criminalised. In the recent case in Bolton, a 17½-year-old who was deemed to be the victim of the sexual relations as the result of which the other men in the case were deemed to be criminals was himself criminalised, prosecuted, convicted and sentenced for the same offence.

I see that the Minister is listening intently, and I hope that he will address that point in his summation. I have had representations on the matter from many outside the House, and I am sure that he has, too. I would support any amendment tabled by the hon. Member for South Ribble or others who feel strongly on the point. Protecting the victim from prosecution would be a relatively limited measure and need not open up the whole issue that the Government's review deals with; indeed, I may be moved to seek to amend the Bill myself in that respect, to ensure that the discrimination ends.

I am concerned about the discriminatory absence of the statutory defence. One might argue the merits of the statutory defence under section 6(3) of the Sexual Offences Act 1956, according to which, if a man under 24 has sex with a girl under the age of consent and did not know that she was so young, a defence can be mounted—whether the court believes him is an issue for the court—but that defence is not available to men prosecuted for consensual homosexual sex with boys under the age of consent under the current law or the law as amended by clause 1.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: I have been hugely impressed by the hon. Gentleman's grasp of the law. Given that he is a doctor of medicine, can he address some of the concerns that have been expressed by doctors about the dangers to young people from the practice of anal intercourse?

Dr. Harris: That was not the subject of my remarks, but I will be happy to send the hon. Gentleman copies of speeches made by myself and by other hon. Members on

the subject. I remind him that I was a member of the British Medical Association council that voted unanimously in favour of equalisation of the age of consent at 16; that council, as I found out on other issues, is generally a conservative body, and it recognised that there were huge health benefits to be achieved by the equalisation of the age of consent and the decriminalisation of consensual sex for young men between 16 and 18.

That view is shared by many organisations that work with children, as well as the Health Education Authority; the Royal College of Nursing; the Royal College of Psychiatrists; the Royal College of Physicians; and an endless list of medical organisations. I shall certainly send the hon. Gentleman a reference. The provision cannot be opposed on the basis of medical opinion. The arguments deployed against it were refuted many years ago by the World Health Organisation, the American Medical Association and others. That is just one example of how the current law is way behind the times.

Mrs. Gorman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Harris: I should prefer not to give way on that matter, as I have other points to make that will be of more interest to the House.

The third way in which the Bill falls short of equalisation is in its sentencing provisions. Given what the hon. Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham) said earlier, I do not want to go into those provisions as there may be confusion in the record, but it is a matter worthy of greater study in Committee to ensure that equality, as opposed to leniency, is achieved.

My fourth question is one that I have raised before and it has to do with the sex offenders register. During the passage of what became the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, an amendment was tabled in my name and in the name of hon. Members from all parties. It would have inserted a provision into the Sex Offenders Act 1997, and it stated:

"Notwithstanding the provisions of this section, a person subject to the notification requirements of this Part by reason of an offence which ceases to be an offence after the commencement of"

another Bill, such as this one, which decriminalises certain acts,

"shall no longer be subject to those notification requirements after the commencement of those sections."

I do not believe that that is retrospective legislation. It seems bizarre that the House can deem consensual sex between a 17-year-old and his older boy friend to be legal now, yet can still cause the older party to be placed on the sex offenders register from the moment of the enactment of this Bill. There are hon. Members in all parties, regardless of whether they agree with all my views on equalisation or with my determination to end all discrimination in sexual offences, who feel that there is something wrong with the legislation. I hope that the Government will look at the matter again.

In a letter to my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith), the Home Secretary wrote:

"I should make clear that none of the changes which may be brought forward as a result of either review will be retrospective, and we do not propose any retrospective changes to the scope of the (sex offences) register in respect of equalisation of the age of consent".

I understand that as far as it goes, but I maintain—and other hon. Members agree—that the provisions of the sex offenders register should not apply prospectively from the time that the offence for which a person is included in the register ceases to be an offence. That would be bizarre. We are not proposing letting people out of prison—that is a separate question—but we are asking whether they should remain subject to the provisions of the sex offenders register. Indeed, I believe that most hon. Members support clause 1 because they do not consider that consenting sexual activity between men over 16, in which there is no abuse of trust by an older person in loco parentis, should ever have been covered by the sex offenders register.

Again in connection with the Bolton case, two of the men were required to sign the sex offenders register after they were convicted last year of consenting gay sex with a man aged 17 and a half. That man did not complain, was not harassed and opposed the prosecution of the two men. One of them was his boy friend, with whom he had had a long-standing relationship and with whom he now lives. That injustice must be put right, although people who have written to the Home Office have not received the clarification that they sought.

I now turn to the review of sexual offences law announced today. The Minister may remember that I proposed a new clause to the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 to get rid of the ludicrous anomaly that exists with regard to the privacy of homosexual sex. As The Pink Paper reported in June 1998,

"Home Office minister Alun Michael this week announced a wide-ranging review of sexual offences law. The move came just days after a Liberal Democrat MP tabled two further amendments to the Government's Crime and Disorder Bill that could remove more gay inequalities from the statute book".

I welcomed that review, but I wanted legislation to follow it that would equalise the law and end discrimination within the lifetime of this Parliament. There is nothing in the published remit of the review that guarantees that such legislation will be forthcoming. Lowering the age of consent to achieve equality is crucial, but it is not the only requirement. Many people would hate this Government, who made a manifesto pledge

"to end unjustifiable discrimination wherever it exists",

if they stopped at just equalising the age of consent. I hope that the Minister will say, when he responds to the debate, whether he envisages legislation being introduced and whether the terms of the review are meant to address the "unjustifiable discrimination" that exists in our law covering sexual offences such as the offence of gross indecency.

I could list the anomalies with the sexual offences law, but I shall not detain the House with them today. So far, the Home Office has said only that

"the law on sexual offences, including the homosexual offences, is much in need of review."

I think that it is much in need of legislation to amend it. The Home Office added that the law

"does not meet the needs of modern society."

I contend that it does not meet the requirements of the European convention on human rights, or of the Human Rights Act 1998, now that it has been incorporated into British law.

[Dr. Harris]

In October 1997, *The Independent* stated that the age of consent

"is the last serious piece of legislation that treats homosexuality as a lesser, shameful expression of human love".

That is not true; it is just one of many of our current laws that do so. In a sense, the first part of the Bill misses an opportunity to put right some of those wrongs. There may be no votes in sexual law reform, but I hope that the Government will not be influenced by fear on this matter and that they will take the opportunity to demonstrate that they are a radical and reforming Administration.

Finally, I wish to turn to the second part of the Bill and deal briefly with some of my concerns about the scope of the abuse of trust measures. I also want to bring to the House's attention another example—the fifth—of a discriminatory application of the law.

On 27 July last year, the Home Secretary wrote to the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ann Keen). In the letter, he correctly described how the Government intended to deal with the abuse of trust measures, as proposed by the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton), when they introduced their Bill. The review that led to clauses 2 to 4 of this Bill was said to concern both young men and young women,

"and in a non-discriminatory way."

It did not say that it would concern young men and young women in a non-discriminatory way, which would be taken to mean that there would be equal protection for boys and girls aged between 16 and 18. When I received a copy of the letter, I took the deliberate use of the word "and" in

"and in a non-discriminatory way"

to mean that the law would not treat homosexuals separately or more severely.

However, the Government have decided to include in the Bill exemptions for heterosexuals that are not available for homosexuals. For example, a teacher aged 23 who is married to a student aged 17 cannot be prosecuted, but of course marriage is available only to heterosexuals. I was delighted to hear the hon. Member for Bassetlaw, in response to an intervention I made earlier, recognise that that was discriminatory and state—I hope that I do not misquote him—that he would have no problem if the Government were to acknowledge an arrangement equivalent to marriage in terms of exemption from the law, under which people aged between 16 and 18 could acquire parental consent for a homosexual relationship, as people of that age have to do when they get married. Imperfect though it may be, such a measure would allow the law not to be discriminatory. That is an important point because the Secretary of State is on record as saying, in response to an intervention that I made during our consideration of the Crime and Disorder Bill on 28 July, that the legislation

"will concern both young men and young women and in a non-discriminatory way."—[*Official Report*, 28 July 1998; Vol. 317, c. 208.]

The question that produced that response was whether there would be different rules for some heterosexuals as opposed to homosexuals.

The Bill gives rise to several other concerns. The abuse of trust legislation, which I broadly welcome, could be used as a form of blackmail against homosexuals. People reporting such a relationship could still be criminalised, as I said earlier. Also, the framing of the Bill is too broad—the National Association of Head Teachers shares that concern. The offence is not restricted to cases in which the abuser is in a position of trust and in loco parentis, but is expanded to include, for example, the 23-year-old male teacher who does something foolish and unprofessional with a consenting 17-year-old sixth former at a school dance, which should be condemned, and who would be subject to the full force of the criminal law in a way that the House would regard as an over-reaction, particularly if there had been no direct educational link between those two people. They may even have had a relationship before either of them came to the school.

I hope that the Minister will accept that although I have been the only hon. Member to raise those concerns today, there is a view outside the House that the legislation is too wide. I also hope that in Committee those of who feel that that is so will have an opportunity to make those points.

In conclusion, the Bill is welcome in all its parts, except that clause 1 could have been a little wider and clauses 2 to 4 a little narrower.

8.22 pm

Mr. Jamie Cann (Ipswich): My speech will be both briefer and less popular than most that I have heard tonight. Essentially, in the Bill we are being asked to accept by the gay lobby—by Outrage! of course, and by Stonewall in a more measured way—that homosexuality is equal in value to heterosexuality in our society. I do not believe that to be the case and, therefore, I cannot vote for the Bill and I shall tell the House why.

According to my observations, it is a fact that homosexual society is totally centred on a person's sexuality. If I may be forgiven at the age of 52 for saying so, sex counts for 1 or 2 per cent. of my life nowadays—on holiday, perhaps 5 per cent., and that is putting it a little strongly. However, in the gay community sexuality seems to matter almost totally. There are gay clubs, gay bars, the gay press, gay this and gay that, and it is not healthy. Despite what other hon. Members have said, I believe that there is far more promiscuity among at least a section of the gay community than in the community as a whole.

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Cann: No, I will not give way as I only want to speak for five minutes. I am sure that my hon. Friend will get a chance to have his say.

Homosexuals cannot have a normal—and I do not hesitate to use that word—family life with children. Equally importantly, homosexuality is dangerous to the males who practise it. I have heard what other hon. Members have said about the prevalence of AIDS among heterosexual as compared to gay populations and I do not believe that it is true. Uganda is one of the few places where AIDS is rampant among the heterosexual population and anal intercourse is used as a method of contraception there. Of course, for homosexuals that is one of the major methods of making love. The anus is not made for such things. The vagina and the penis are made to fit, but the penis and the rectum are not. The mixing of

blood and semen is one of the best ways to pass on, not only AIDS but many other virulent diseases. We are told to wash our hands when we leave the toilet because, at some stage, our hands may get near our lips. Those homosexual practices are set out in the Terrence Higgins pamphlet—not a publication that one would expect to be against such practices. For example, rimming—

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): Oh God!

Mr. Cann: It happens. Rimming, where one man licks out the rectum of another man, is not a practice that I would want my sons to get involved in; nor indeed is fisting, which is where one inserts the whole of one's fist and part of one's forearm up someone else's rectum. Those things happen.

We have heard a lot of talk about love, compassion and toleration. It is time that we got a few facts into the argument and decided whether we really believe that those practices are as equal as family life—for me, no, and for my sons, no. If it is not right for my sons, it is not right for other people's sons. If the House passes the Bill—no doubt it will—we will be sending the message that homosexuality is of equal value to heterosexuality and that it is just as good. I do not believe that that is so.

If it were true that one cannot help being homosexual and one is born that way, there would be no point in trying to fight against it. However, that is not always the case. It is wrong to argue from the particular to the general, but if the House will forgive me, I will do so on this occasion. I have a friend who went away to sea at 15, as a lot of other young lads did. They were out on the deep sea for a long while and, according to him, it is true that normal lads—I shall use that word again—were turned by some of the old lags because they were out there for all that time. If it is possible for young lads, or young lasses, to be turned in that way, it is the duty of our legal system to prevent it for as long as we possibly can. For that reason, I shall certainly vote against the Bill.

8.28 pm

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Comparing the atmosphere in the Chamber today with the atmosphere on 22 June 1998 when we debated this matter for the first time, is like replaying a football match after one already knows the final score. However, because of some of the remarks made by those in favour of the Bill, who have termed those of us who will vote against it tonight as "deeply prejudiced"—"prejudice based on fear" is a phrase that has been used again and again—I must say for the record that I can well remember being deeply impressed many years ago by a film called, "Victim", which starred Dirk Bogarde and which showed how outrageous, monstrous and unfair it is for people to be open to blackmail, public humiliation and the destruction of their professional career because they happen to be homosexual.

For me, this debate is not primarily about homosexuality. I am just as concerned about the effect of the measures on heterosexual girls as on homosexual boys aged 16 and 17. My hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward), in a long and articulate speech, observed that predators are predators, and victims are victims. I add that adults are adults, and children are children. I am concerned about ages of consent, the protection of children and the transmission of disease.

I mentioned the debate last year. I remember how struck I was with the intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill), who pointed out that the effect of the measure then proposed, which is proposed again tonight, would be to legitimate the act of buggery or anal sex, not only between adults and male children of 16 and 17 but between adults and female children of 16 and 17.

We have heard much about criminalisation. Several hon. Members have generously let me intervene when time was less pressing than it is now to put this point: how can one argue against retaining the age of consent at 18 without saying that the same arguments apply to any other age of consent that one cares to name? I am talking about the ratchet that will lead us inevitably from 16 to 15 to 14 and to other ages that campaigning groups have in mind.

Mr. Dawson: I share the hon. Gentleman's concern about reducing the age of consent below 16. Surely an equal age of consent at 16 is an excellent way to add credibility to that limit and avoid a flaw in the system that unscrupulous people can exploit? Many other laws, such as those relating to marriage and to the age at which children leave home and finish full-time education, coalesce at 16, making that age more effective. This is a child protection issue above all.

Dr. Lewis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention but not for its length at this late hour. I would like to give way to other hon. Members. If I do, I hope that they will keep their interventions briefer. It is the essence of my case that the Bill legitimises a dangerous physical activity that will increase radically the prospects of children—boys and girls of 16 and 17—contracting fatal diseases. I shall come on to that presently.

Returning to ages of consent, I have the Library research paper prepared for the debate on Edwina Currie's Bill in 1994. I will read a short paragraph into the record. It states:

"The history of the age of consent for girls shows that 16 is a relatively high age compared to previous centuries. For over 700 years the criminal law has by statute prohibited men from having unlawful sexual intercourse with girls below a certain age. Originally, in 1275, the age was 12 and it was not changed until 1875 when the Offences Against the Person Act raised it to 13. In 1885"—

only 10 years later—

"the Criminal Law Amendment Act raised the age again—this time to the present age of 16. The 1885 legislation was enacted after a campaign aimed at eliminating child prostitution and the sexual exploitation of young girls. It was also the legislation which introduced the offence of gross indecency between men."

I contend that the purpose of ages of consent is not to criminalise the people below them but to criminalise the people above them and stop them preying on the people below them. The record of civilised societies is that, as they advance, the age of consent is raised to afford greater protection, not lowered to afford less. If the argument for equality is so overwhelming to hon. Members who will vote the other way—if they are so desperate for equality—they could consider the state of society and teenage pregnancies and examine raising the age for heterosexual consent to the same as that for homosexual consent.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Lewis: No, I shall not give way again.

[Dr. Lewis]

Let us move on to the question of the protection of children. We are dealing with one of the two activities that appear, in this country, to be primarily responsible for the transmission of the HIV virus and AIDS: the sharing of needles and anal sex. It is interesting to note that, for all the reams of argument advanced by those who will vote for the Bill, not one has given, or even attempted to give, a convincing argument—or any argument—to explain why the incidence of HIV and AIDS in this country is so much higher among people who engage in anal sex than among those who do not.

It was intriguing to hear the arguments in respect of Africa—a continent for which we are not currently legislating. It was said that, in Africa, transmission of the HIV virus is effected primarily through heterosexual sex. I do not know whether that is so, but, even if it is, the hon. Member for Exeter (Mr. Bradshaw) shot down that argument by explaining, very lucidly, that heterosexual sex in that community is far more likely to spread AIDS because resistance is weakened by the presence of so many other rampant sexually transmitted diseases. If we were conducting the debate in that context, the hon. Gentleman's argument would be irresistible. However, we are not debating in that context, because, in this country, people's resistance is not weakened by rampant STDs; therefore, we do not have to consider that argument here.

Even if in such countries the practice of heterosexual straight sex transmitted AIDS easily, in this country and in our circumstances, manifestly it would not and manifestly it does not. It does not help to have people such as the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) regale the House with a long list of profound bodies that are all in favour of the Bill when he, as a practising doctor, cannot come here and tell us why the prevalence of transmission of HIV/AIDS is so much higher among the homosexual community in Britain than it is among the female or male/female communities, unless it is because of the indulgence by members of our male homosexual community in the practice of anal sex. Hon. Members going into the Lobby tonight to vote in favour of the Bill should congratulate themselves while they can. They will not be thanked when the victims of the legislation receive their death sentence diagnoses in a decade's time.

The clause dealing with the abuse of trust offence has already been criticised for its inevitable anomalies by responsible bodies such as the National Association of Head Teachers. We recognise that a person set in authority over a child—I repeat, a child—of 16 or 17 is in a position to exercise undue influence on that child, but what about what may be termed "personality power"? If children of 16 and 17 need to be protected from people who exercise too much power because of a position of authority, what about the need to protect them from people who exercise too much power because of their greater age, their forcefulness and their personality? In other words, should we be making these provisions at all? The clause has been tacked on, like a piece of elastoplast slapped on in an attempt to cover up a dangerous wound.

Looking at this mish-mash, I was tempted to describe the Bill as a dog's breakfast; but, having listened to the arguments, some of them—perhaps all of them—sincere, I realise that that description is both inadequate and inaccurate. The Bill is not to be likened to something that goes into the front end of an animal, but to that which comes out at the rear.

8.40 pm

Ms Hazel Blears (Salford): I am delighted to contribute, albeit briefly, but I do not recognise the terms of the debate in the language used by the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis). The language that he used and the sentiments that he expressed are certainly not those used by many of my Salford constituents who have raised the issue with me, having thought at great length about the complex matters involved. I certainly should not want the debate to be conducted in the terms used by some hon. Members tonight.

The issue was last debated in June. I was delighted to vote in favour of amendment on that occasion, and I will be doing so again tonight because I believe that we are debating a fundamental issue of human rights, equal rights and citizenship. The Bill is based on fundamental values—respect, tolerance, equality, compassion and understanding. They are the values of our Government, and they should be the values that guide our policy making and our legislation. Tonight we have an opportunity to rid ourselves of the bigotry and prejudice which have pervaded our law for far too long.

The subject is a matter of concern in every constituency in the land. I have had many letters supporting both sides of the argument, but the ones that have moved me the most are those from young gay men who were frightened and in despair and who felt extremely vulnerable because of the current law. They have been denied the right to express their sexuality in a loving relationship. They certainly do not feel that they should face the terrifying prospect of being branded criminals.

I believe that the Bill will improve the health prospects of many young gay men. I noticed that the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) was not convinced by the National AIDS Trust; nor was he convinced by the all-party parliamentary group on AIDS; but perhaps he will be convinced by the British Medical Association, which states in its report:

"Of prime concern . . . to the medical profession as a whole, are the concerns that the present law may inhibit efforts to improve the sexual health of young homosexual and bisexual men. The average age of first homosexual encounter has been found to be 15.7, and it is vital that these young homosexual men received effective health education and health care."

That is the real issue at stake.

Research has shown that in many cases the law as it stands hinders the vital work of teachers, youth workers and health promotion professionals in trying to educate young men to help them to negotiate the minefield of sex and to help them have safer sex which will protect their health.

It is true that young men are frightened to discuss these vital matters and that professional advisers are often caught in a nightmare, struggling to balance the issues of trust and confidentiality to their clients with their obligations under the current law. It is an invidious position to be in—to know that one's prime duty is to try to help young people who are desperately seeking assistance while, at the same time, having to worry whether, as a professional, one might be aiding and abetting a criminal offence. That is a ridiculous state of affairs.

The choices that young men have to make must be informed by accurate and up-to-date knowledge about HIV and, indeed, wider health issues. As one Opposition Member said, it is also crucial that young women should have access to good sex education. The prevalence of teenage pregnancy has a most dreadful effect on young people's health, and the damage can last for many years. It is therefore vital that young men and young women have access to high-quality health education.

The effect of the current law on young men's mental health ought to be of great concern to us all. Much has already been said about the prevalence of suicide and suicide attempts by young people who feel vulnerable and isolated. The long-term effects on their mental health cannot be underestimated. Certainly in the north-west, especially in Manchester, the incidence of suicide among young men is very high. We must all recognise our obligation to do whatever we can to support and sustain those young men.

I have to comment on what I believe to be the unhealthy emphasis placed by Members on both sides of the Chamber on the subject of anal intercourse. Research has revealed that only a minority of gay men engage in that activity and the vast majority of those do not have their first such experience until the age of 21. It is legal for them to engage in anal intercourse at the age of 18, but they do not do so. They make a mature decision about how they want to conduct and express their sexuality. The unhealthy emphasis on those issues is to be deplored.

The Bill contains excellent proposals to protect young people from exploitation by those who are in a position of trust. Last November, the Government published their response to the Utting report on safeguards for children. I recall the memorable occasion when the Secretary of State for Health acknowledged the failure of Ministers, councillors and professionals such as social workers—all of society, in fact—to safeguard and protect children in care. That was one of the most refreshing statements ever made by a Cabinet Minister about our collective responsibility to those particularly vulnerable children.

My hon. Friend the Minister of State, Home Office, played a pivotal role in drafting the Government's response to the report. The Bill is part of our move towards joined-up government and towards bringing together health, social services and the criminal justice system to try to deliver important policies. In his statement, the Secretary of State for Health said that

"our proposals are intended to ensure that those responsible, at any level, for children in care behave towards them as any good parent tries to behave towards his or her children".—[*Official Report*, 5 November 1998; Vol. 318, c. 1011.]

The Bill will extend that duty of responsibility to those who are in a position of trust regarding our most vulnerable children.

The response also said that we shall extend the duty of local authorities to assist, befriend and advise young people in care from the age of 16 to the age of 18 because we recognise that those duties should not come to a full stop when young people are at the vulnerable age of 16. As a society, we ought to be caring for, sustaining and supporting young people in the way that good families automatically do. We also recommend that there should be legal safeguards to protect children in care.

The Bill will play a vital role in fulfilling those commitments. It is but one step and there is still a great deal to be done in health and social services to protect those children, but it demonstrates how we can use the criminal justice system as well as other areas of policy to try to ensure that children are protected.

Many of my constituents were absolutely devastated last year when the amendment on the age of consent was rejected by the other place. I received almost an avalanche of correspondence from people who were not only disappointed at the result because of personal interest but devastated that the democratic view of the House should be contravened by the other place. The sooner we embark on our programme of reform and remove the prejudice and bigotry that the other place has exhibited on this issue, the better.

Finally, I draw the attention of the House to a terrible incident that has brought the issues into sharper focus in my mind: the arranged commercial marriage that took place in Birmingham this afternoon of a couple who had never met before, who had never embarked on a relationship and who have been brought together for commercial advantage and entertainment. That is a travesty of the meaningful relationship of marriage. We live in a society where such a sham is perfectly legal and acceptable, yet a close, loving relationship between two young men who want to express their sexuality together in a warm and caring way is illegal. What kind of society do we live in when that expresses our values? I urge colleagues to think carefully and to support the Bill.

8.49 pm

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): This is a hugely difficult subject. I have not the faintest idea whether the Bill will achieve what we hope that it will achieve. That is partly because the moment that it is passed, as I am sure it will be, the goalposts will move and it will be impossible to attribute any measurable outcome to it.

I find it impossible to believe that, in a world where some people even undergo surgery in order to align their body with their perception of their sexuality, some are not born to be homosexual. Of course they are. It is hard for someone like me, whose primary frame of reference is Christian, when so many Christians assume that there is only one possible way to vote. I wish that it were as simple as that. I shall explain why I, as someone who tries to follow Christ, will almost certainly vote to lower the age of consent. Much of what I have to say was very much better put by my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward).

I shall touch on three issues that seem to be central to this question. The first is the age and nature of sexual behaviour. What, for example, is appropriate, and is it the same as moral? Secondly, is the law effective at protecting vulnerable young people, or does it do more harm than good? Thirdly, why are the sins of sexual behaviour regarded by so many Christians as peculiarly dreadful?

I believe that the desire of most people, as expressed in many opinion polls, is to have a lasting, exclusive relationship with one other person. That expresses a recognition that such a relationship is normally the best for building up both participants and, where children are involved, for building up children also. That is why the Christian religion lays such stress on faithfulness and asks for such big promises from marrying couples. It seems that the same desire for a long-lasting, stable relationship characterises most homosexuals also.

[Mr. Andrew Rowe]

We all know that human behaviour frequently falls short of the ideal. It is a truism that, when young people first become sexually aware, they frequently find it exciting and attractive to enjoy sex with another person. Some, indeed, become highly promiscuous. Like anyone else engaged in immoral behaviour, they justify their action by involving as many others in similar behaviour as possible. Such herd behaviour is often prominent in public demonstrations on this issue. It makes me less rather than more sympathetic when I hear it. The underlying theme to many hon. Members' concerns about the costs of inappropriate or immoral sexual behaviour is in fact that promiscuity is frequently the spreader of disease, the cause of unwanted pregnancies, and so on. That is the key.

In such herd behaviour, people are often supported by self-appointed experts, many of whom base their public pronouncements on their personal experience of a messy private life to which they never admit. If they are counsellors of such activity, they should be made to state their own position. Needless to say, they often conceal it. Such behaviour is destructive. I am very glad that much greater efforts are being made to support the many young people who want to resist peer pressure to carry sexual experimentation further than they want. We should be doing everything in our power to assist them and the agencies that try to help.

There is a case for saying that, as we prolong the dependency of childhood, often into people's early 20s, the age of legal sexual relations should be raised for all sexual orientations. One could argue that the law reflects the age at which the independence of a job gave promise of starting an independent household, and that all that has changed for most young people today. It is quite unrealistic to suggest any such change. Only the Taliban—not even new Labour—could realistically turn the clock back in such a way. Paradoxically, good food and good health are bringing down the age of puberty, just as our social behaviour is lengthening the period of dependency on parents. That is one of the unresolved difficulties that underlie much of our confusion in this debate.

Even if I have an unrealistic thought that 18 would be a better age, I believe that there is some sense in removing legal sanctions from sexual behaviour at the age that we have all accepted to be the age when young men and women are able to take full-time employment and leave behind the status of pupil.

If sex outside a permanent relationship falls short of the ideal, that is often the definition that people use of immorality. However, I expect that most of us would distinguish between experimentation between friends and the exploitation of vulnerability by a man or woman whose aim is only self-gratification. That is not only immoral but cruel, and often causes lasting damage to the victim.

That brings me to my second point. Is the law effective? I do not know. What I do know is that most of the people who want to keep the law as it is do not know, either. One group of people who know more than I do is the group that works to pick up the pieces after a young person has been exploited. I am a trustee of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, which perhaps sees more of such victims than most other organisations, and its advice to me is that its work would be more easily done, and a number of young men would be more effectively safeguarded, if it were not a crime to have had a homosexual relationship, willingly or unwillingly.

In an area as difficult and complex as this, I give most credence to those who have the skills and generosity to work with the victims of sexual abuse, and I question the role of the law in matters of this kind. It can too often be used as a prop, which allows the rest of us to evade our human duty to help and support people who are in confusion or distress.

Finally, I should like to ask a question of my Christian friends, some of whom I know will be disappointed at the position that I have adopted. Why does the Christian family give such pre-eminence to our falling short of excellence in sexual matters? Why does it not place equal emphasis on the many other ways in which we all fall short? I am sorry that the most authoritarian interpreter of scripture in the House, who spoke earlier, is not in the Chamber.

In the New Testament, our Lord gives much greater prominence to injustice, greed, hypocrisy and dishonesty than he does to sexual shortcomings. I sometimes wonder: does our ferocity about homosexuality stem from the fact that, for most of us, it has never been an issue? Would it disturb our equanimity if we were to meet equal ferocity about our—almost obscene—level of comfort in this country compared with the poverty of most of the world? Is it because, like me, so many of us have broken the promises that we made before God at our wedding, and it is disturbing to be asked to look at that?

I cannot know whether I have taken the right decision today, but I hope and believe that I may have done, and I hope and pray that we can take a generous view of behaviour that we do not share. I believe that if we do so, we may be better placed to help young people come to terms with their sexual confusions, and thereby protect them from the exploitation that we all deplore.

8.58 pm

Ms Beverley Hughes (Stretford and Urmston): I shall keep my remarks brief, but I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I am very pleased to follow the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe); I shall not mention many of his comments because I wholeheartedly agree with them. I shall start by countering some of the arguments that have been made against the Bill.

It has been argued that because, under current legislation, there have been no convictions of 16 to 18-year-olds, there is no need to repeal the legislation. That is a spurious argument, because the incidence of convictions is irrelevant to the principles of the Bill and what it is designed to achieve. The aims of the Bill are, first, to ensure that we treat young people equally before the law; and, secondly, to ensure that, wherever possible, and as far as possible, we do not criminalise young people for behaviour that is not inherently criminal.

Secondly, we have heard the argument that homosexuality is abnormal, disease-ridden and dangerous, and not equal to heterosexual behaviour and relationships. That is an ill-informed point of view, to put it mildly. It assumes that homosexual behaviour, unlike heterosexual

behaviour, is entirely or almost exclusively focused on physical sexual activity. Of course that is not true. It is not true of heterosexual behaviour and it is not true, in my experience, of homosexual behaviour between people who love each other.

The argument is spurious also in so far as it presents homosexuality as posing undue risk of disease or damage. In one sense, all sexual activity involves some risk. Without recent advances in medical science, women could have been forgiven not long ago for refusing to engage in sexual behaviour because of the risks that that posed to them—the risks of illness, the effects of contraception, and childbirth.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): Is it the hon. Lady's understanding that women are protected by the law from the act of buggery? Does she believe that that is correct, or does she believe that the law is imperfect in that respect and should be changed? Will she explain her answer to those questions?

Ms Hughes: I am making a much simpler point. The hon. Gentleman has misunderstood me. I am simply saying that any physical sexual activity involves a degree of risk. The arguments that we have heard tonight, which parade homosexuality as some highly abnormal, disease-ridden activity which presents great risks, are spurious and inaccurate.

I have always felt that people who speak in such authoritarian, intolerant and inflammatory terms about an activity in which they do not engage and which they do not share are giving us much more information about themselves and their attitudes than about the subject of their remarks.

Thirdly, and more important, we have heard that lowering the age of consent for young men in homosexual relationships would be tantamount to encouraging young men to enter homosexual relationships. That is a false premise. Equalising the age of consent is not tantamount to promoting homosexuality. I share the view of the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan), who has left the Chamber. He suggested that we should discourage all young people from engaging in sexual activity too early. I agree with that.

Adolescence is a time when young people have a great deal to cope with. The complications and the emotional resources that a sexual relationship demands can add another layer of difficulty. That is the same for young women and for young men. It is not an argument against lowering the age of consent for homosexuality.

Indeed, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Ms Blears), most young men who subsequently define themselves as homosexual have so defined themselves well before the age of 16. The argument that lowering the age of consent would push young men early into homosexuality against their nature does not hold up.

My main point relates to the arguments about child protection. That is a subject with which I was greatly concerned in my professional life, before entering the House. I must tell hon. Members that lowering the age of consent has no impact, one way or the other, on whether or not we protect children adequately.

A few years ago, I undertook major research for the Department of Health, investigating the incidence, and the nature, of organised and ritual sexual abuse. Some of that research was traumatic. It involved reading the transcripts of children's evidence in some 20,000 cases in which an allegation of sexual abuse of an organised or ritual nature had been made.

I can tell hon. Members that the vast majority of those cases involved children well below the age of 16. There were various ways in which children were drawn into sexual abuse—for example, through paedophiles. Paedophiles are people in our community—youth workers, teachers, piano teachers and scout masters. Although I do not wish to taint everyone in those professions, a number of paedophiles use those activities to access and groom young children. They do not access and groom 16 to 18-year-olds.

Another area in which children are abused is prostitution. The vast majority of young girls and boys who go into prostitution do so mainly because they were sexually abused as younger children by men, and very occasionally, by women.

The idea that lowering the age of consent for young boys will have an impact on the inadequate way in which we protect all children is not a valid argument against doing so. To protect children more adequately, we must address the flaws in the criminal justice system—we are doing so. We must also act strongly against prostitution and give sentences that measure up to the seriousness of those crimes.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): One of my hon. Friends referred earlier to the ratchet effect. Does the hon. Lady understand that, if the age of consent is lowered to 16, there will be downward ratchet effect? No prosecutions are effectively brought against abusers or those who get 13-year-old girls pregnant now, so none will be brought against the abusers of 13 or 14-year-olds. Does the hon. Lady realise that that will damage the safety of those to whom she rightly refers as "children"?

Ms Hughes: No, I do not accept that argument. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that there are very few convictions in relation to the sexual abuse of children. Research shows that the reason is largely because the children are very young and are not regarded as credible witnesses in court. It is not because 13-year-olds consent to sex. Thus, we need to deal with our criminal justice system and evidential rules if we are to protect children better, and lowering the age of consent will have no impact on that.

The Bill as a whole addresses some important issues. One is that of equality before the law for young people. Many families of young people who are engaged in homosexual relationships, and the organisations that represent them, write to me about the difficulty and pain caused to young men who want to relate to another young man—in an emotional, not necessarily a physical, way. The current position makes their lives extremely difficult. So far in this debate, the arguments against lowering the age of consent have not been valid. However, there is a valid reason for taking this course of action.

The second issue is that of abuse of trust. It will become a criminal offence for someone in a position of trust to abuse that position. For the reasons that I have outlined, and because of my experience in this area, I very much support that provision. Children are, or have been, badly abused in residential care and institutional settings, and

[Ms Hughes]

the provision is therefore long overdue. It is about protecting children, but lowering the age of consent will have no impact on it one way or the other.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. I am keen to let at least another four Back Benchers speak before 9.30, when the winding-up speeches will be made. That can be done if they take five minutes each.

9.9 pm

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): A key feature of this debate, and something that has driven us into lengthy discourse, is the fact that we have ranged very wide of the subject in hand—the age at which British citizens can freely engage in consensual sexual acts under our criminal law, and the age at which they are free from criminal penalty for acts in which they choose to engage.

This debate is not about sending messages, or encouraging or discouraging forms of activity; it is about how we see our criminal codes fitting into our national life. I fundamentally disagree with comments made early in the debate by the hon. Member for New Forest, (Dr Lewis), and by other hon. Members since, that our criminal law should be about telling people what they should do according to the will of the majority.

Our criminal code, many centuries ago, indeed included laws against adultery and about all sorts of behaviour, including, in various periods, whether people should dance, sing or go to plays. Our law has evolved in a positive direction since then, towards a modern and liberal code. The foundation of that is the belief that the criminal law fundamentally and primarily exists to prevent citizens from committing harm to each other and, once such harm has been committed, to punish the perpetrators. It does not exist to tell us what to do.

I am wary of politicians telling us anything about how we should carry out our sex lives. I am pleased that the criminal code has evolved in a much more liberal direction, often because it had been shown to be hypocritical and because politicians had set rules that they, due to their own human nature, could not live up to. As power structures have become more democratic, people have rightly demanded a more democratic criminal code.

We must be wary of any criminal provisions that deprive citizens of their liberty. That is a fundamental issue; we must have a proportionate response to any actions that are carried out. The age of consent is primarily about deciding at which age young people acquire certain rights—it is their right to do with their bodies as they wish—and the responsibilities that go with those rights. I would not in any way claim that there are no responsibilities.

As other hon. Members have said, we should discourage anyone from having sexual relations at such an early age, but that discouragement would not be assisted by threatening people with a gaol sentence. They would have acquired responsibility for their bodies, and it would not be helpful if the nanny state tried to usurp that responsibility. It would be much clearer to say at 16, "You are responsible for your sexual activity. We can offer advice and assistance, but we will not throw you in prison for choosing to do things in your own way."

To a degree, the age of consent will always be set arbitrarily, but, on that basis, 16 is a sensible age at which we can assume that a young person has acquired sufficient responsibility. An age of permission is not the same as an age of compulsion. We do not require people to smoke when they reach 16, or to get married, and making something permissible in no sense makes it compulsory. We must always bear that in mind in the debate.

I generally welcome the abuse of trust provisions. The hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton) was right to raise the issue previously and, as I said in response to his earlier comments, I was disappointed that it became an argument between us. We agree on a common end, but not on the method of achieving it.

A general position of authority provision would lead to considerable problems and would not be a workable law. For example, if a sexual relationship began between assistants aged 21 and 17 who were working for me, and the 21-year-old was the line manager of the 17-year-old, a general authority provision would catch them. That would be unworkable. I understand that the hon. Member for Bassetlaw, whose knowledge of parliamentary procedure is deeper than mine, was trying to tease the Government towards giving a more detailed response, and I welcome that response.

We agree about abuse of a position of trust and/or authority. The other issue that was referred to was how we deal with pimping. We could introduce specific criminal provisions—outside the scope of the Bill and dissociated with the age of consent—and I have corresponded with the Minister of State, Home Office, who has responsibility for those matters, and with his predecessor. No one can consent to be pimped, and we should deal with pimping in a serious way.

I generally welcome the Bill and hope that it receives a fair wind.

9.14 pm

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): Tonight's debate is not only about young men growing up. In many ways, it is about us growing up as a society. I have been greatly impressed by many of the comments from both sides of the House, although I have been saddened by many of the representations made to me, some of which were of the same type as those mentioned earlier in the debate.

Some of the most lubricious details that have been sent to me contain an element of denial. I suggest that people who send so much information are perhaps asking questions that they should answer.

Overall, however, I am asked why I—as a Christian, and a person who tries to lead my life in the imitation of Christ—would, as I intend to, support the Bill tonight. Like many others who have spoken, I have no doubts, no fears, no worries and no concerns about that. The essential, core element of my Christianity is the love that Our Lord showed us, and in my view it is far better for us to include than to exclude. Tolerance is better than intolerance, and recognition of reality must be the way forward.

We have heard tonight that this is the thin end of the wedge. I consider that to be an intellectually fraudulent argument. I know of no Labour Member who has any

hidden agenda to extend the legislation to loose mere anarchy on the world, and to reduce us to a libertarian society, if such a thing exists. With the exception of the repeal of the iniquitous section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988—which I hope every one of us with half an ounce of wit or sense will seek to repeal at the earliest opportunity—I am aware of no move towards any further legislation or to furthering lowering of the age of consent; quite the reverse, in fact.

The other equally offensive and intellectually fraudulent argument suggests that homosexuality is a fad—something that a teenager assumes like this year's fashions, and then discards. My hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Mr. Cann) spoke of the experience of young matelots on the deep sea. I recall little sexual activity on the blue waters when I was a 16-year-old sailor; what there was, it must be said, tended to be of a solitary nature. To imply, as my hon. Friend did—in an extraordinary expression, which completely failed to appreciate the reality—that young men could be "turned" in that way is contrary not only to my experience at sea, which admittedly was not very long, but to my experience of human life and of human nature. With respect, I must say that people are not "turned"; they are inherently what they are. It is not a fad.

Many speakers have referred to the heart-searching that they have done in deciding how to vote. They have talked about their children, and I think that is right. My hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ann Keen) spoke eloquently and poignantly about her son; I am sure that every hon. Member will join me in paying tribute to what she said tonight and in June. I too have a son. I am something of a failure in west London Roman Catholic circles in that, as the eldest of eight children, I have only two of my own, although that may be due to the political life.

My son is not yet 16. I love my son, and I hope that I will always love my son. I do not know whether he will be gay, straight or bisexual—that is up to him; that is what he will be—but, if he comes out as a gay man at the age of 16 or 17, I would like to show my love and respect for him by saying that I value and respect his sexuality just as much as I respect his sister's sexuality.

If we refused to pass the Bill tonight, we would condemn young men to be a lesser breed within the law. We would condemn people to be considered inferior, and to be excluded. That is inequitable and indefensible. Tonight, we have an opportunity to strike a blow for the one key, glorious principle that has been mentioned so many times—for the one word "equality".

9.19 pm

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Like the hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound), I spent some time at sea, as a utility steward on a P and O liner. My cabin mates gave me this advice: if I went for a drink with the welfare officer and the welfare officer invited me to discuss my sex life with him and asked me to shut the door, I should shut the door, but should make sure that I was on the outside. I took that advice.

This has been a serious debate. I am sorry that those hon. Members who have vigorously supported the Bill have tried to portray those of us who deeply and profoundly oppose it as bigots or intolerant, saying that we do not care. That is far from the truth. It takes a lot of guts to fight for one's cause, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) did superbly, because the accusation is quickly made that one is intolerant and uncaring.

Let me address the key issues. First, the debate and the Bill are about the protection of young boys aged 16 or 17. We are not talking about the principle of homosexuality. We are talking about the issue as it applies to young boys of 16 or 17.

Secondly, as I said to the Home Secretary, the House has to understand what message will be sent from this place to our constituents, to the wider public and to the nation as a whole on how we wish society to be organised. That is the question that will go out from the House tonight. The Government are trying to have it both ways.

The Bill is not a Back-Bench measure; it is a Government Bill. The Government say that they are inclusive and all the rest of it, and wish to curry favour with certain sections of society, but, at the same time, they publish a weighty document on the family because all their polling says that the family is a good thing, so that is what they need to support if they are to continue to curry favour with voters.

The Government's document, much of which I agree with, says:

"This Government believes that marriage provides a strong foundation for stable relationships."

It goes on to say:

"we do share the belief of the majority of people that marriage provides the most reliable framework for raising children."

The Bill sends a message that conflicts with that one. It strikes at the heart of the concept of the nuclear family forming the basis of society.

I say that because, like the hon. Member for Ipswich (Mr. Cann), whose contribution was extremely courageous, frank and accurate, I do not believe that homosexual activity is the same as heterosexual sex. The procreation of children cannot, by definition, take place within a family of homosexuals; it is not possible. The nation continues through heterosexual relations.

My fear is that the Bill reinforces the idea that is already being broadcast through various organs of the media—newspapers and, particularly, television, which is the most instrumental and influential—that a young person can choose between two equally valid life styles. That is not my view. I am sorry if others disagree, but I do not believe that that is the way in which to build a sound society.

The matter was well summed up by Baroness Young, who said:

"It is said that this whole issue is one of equality. I do not myself believe that there is a moral equivalence between heterosexual and homosexual relationships. Furthermore, I think that boys and girls are not equal in emotional development. I believe it is a very doubtful argument to bring equality into this issue at all. In many respects it simply does not apply. We are not talking about equal things."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 22 July 1998; Vol. 592, c. 939.]

I entirely support what she said in her courageous fight in the other place.

My second point concerns the question: is the Bill the thin end of the wedge? Although others have argued that it is not, I believe that it is. The hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) made it clear

[Mr. Gerald Howarth]

that he views the Bill as a limited measure and wishes to go further; he set out ways in which he felt that that could be done. Labour Members have said that they wish section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 to be repealed. Indeed, the other day, I heard the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), on the radio, assuring someone on a programme about homosexuality that the Government would introduce measures to repeal section 28 at the earliest possible opportunity.

My third point concerns health. I must point out to the hon. Members for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes) and for Salford (Ms Blears) that the National Blood Service refuses to accept blood from any man who has had sex with another man. If anal sex does not cause HIV, what does? Why is the National Blood Service giving that clear instruction to all those who come before it?

I shall conclude now, because I know that others want to speak. We should pay heed to public opinion. Some 70 per cent. of people are not in favour of lowering the age of consent. We have heard a lot about democracy in another place. Perhaps we should listen to the public on this. The Bill threatens to be a charter for the abuse of young boys. That is why I shall oppose it.

9.26 pm

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): In the few moments available to me, I should like to dwell on at least two speeches that I have had the privilege—in one case the dubious privilege—to hear, because they were both extremely honest. One was by the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe), who took us through the struggles that he had had with the issue, coming from a deeply Christian background. He came out in favour of tolerance and all that is virtuous about Christianity by coming down in favour of the Bill.

The second very honest speech—I do not know about courageous—was by my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Mr. Cann). He said clearly what many of those who oppose the measure are scared to say: that, in their opinion, homosexuality does not equate in any way with heterosexuality. I entirely dispute that view, but it is sincerely held, even if the speech was rather strange.

I have no truck with the mean-minded, nasty little speech, bereft of any humanity and laced with intolerance—as expected—by the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis). It was unmitigated nonsense from start to finish. Sadly, he is not here at the moment. When I see him, I shall remind him of what I have just said. He needs to be told and have that put in his face. More than any other hon. Member, he probably shares, hook, line and sinker, the feelings that my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich had the courage to stand up and express, but he hid behind all sorts of tricks and loquaciousness to avoid saying so. That was a disgrace.

The only substantive argument that we have heard against equalising the age of consent today—or in the previous debate on the issue—is the view expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich, which fails to recognise homosexuality as natural or normal, regarding it only as a perversion or an aberration. On that basis, many of the arguments against the Bill are at least logical. They are still profoundly wrong, but at least they can be viewed as logical and, to some extent, honest. I do not support those arguments, because they are unsustainable, un-Christian, intolerant and logically and morally flawed.

If I were reflecting my mailbag, on balance I would go to the No Lobby rather than the Aye Lobby. I submitted a petition reflecting that opinion last time that the issue was debated. It included my mother's signature on one page, so I am not necessarily even reflecting my family's view.

Those who want intolerance, inhumanity and a lack of equality in this country in the 21st century should vote in the No Lobby. Those who want tolerance, fairness and equity at 16 should come with us in the Aye Lobby.

9.29 pm

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): This has been an interesting, and at times passionate, debate. At the outset, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) said that this matter would be the subject of a free vote among Conservative Members. I shall be speaking for myself in the debate, and I will make it clear that I shall be voting for the age of consent to remain at 18. I accept that I will be in a minority in the vote because, as my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) said, after the earlier debate on this issue in this Parliament, this is a bit like playing a football match when the result is already know. This has not been like the occasion in 1994, when the outcome was in some doubt until a late stage.

We have heard speeches of some passion. Pre-eminent among them was the sincere, passionate and good speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward)—although I did not agree with him. He spoke in favour of the freedom of the individual, and made memorable points that were bound to appeal to hon. Members on both sides of the House. Certainly, he appealed to Conservative Members by appealing to the Conservative traditions of freedom, tolerance and respect for minorities. He quoted the late Enoch Powell as an authority on the need to protect minorities in these matters. I do not go down the same road as my hon. Friend, but I pay tribute to him on his speech. I appreciate that he made it with relevant experience, as a director of Childline and as someone who has thought about the issues carefully.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) made an equally outstanding speech. He spoke with great conviction, sincerity and passion. He emphasised that the vote inevitably sends a message to members of the public—we must face that fact. My hon. Friend the Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) made the same point. There seemed to be some dissent in some quarters about that proposition, but it is difficult for hon. Members on the other side of the argument to dispute that we are sending a message—not least because a number of them made the self-same point.

Contrary to what has just been said by the hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty), my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East made a powerful and honest speech in which there was no mistaking his point of view. I do not think that it was entirely fair of the hon. Gentleman to describe my hon. Friend's speech as he did. My hon. Friend made a powerful speech, which may not have been agreed with in all quarters, but was sincere, honest and clear.

My hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe) made an equally sincere and powerful speech, and made important points about the nature of marriage. He spoke for many in the House when he referred to the need to avoid promiscuity, and for all relationships of whatever nature to be faithful. My hon. Friend also spoke from a position of experience, as a trustee of the NSPCC.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) made some important points, and it was fair of him to say that those on the other side of the argument are wrong to characterise those taking his view, in favour of retaining the age of consent at 18, as bigoted, intolerant and uncaring. My hon. Friend proceeded to demonstrate exactly why that is a bogus assertion. He made clear his concerns, which will lead him, as matter of conscience, to vote against the Bill.

We have heard a number of speeches of equal passion from Labour Members, who have, in the main—although not exclusively—spoken in favour of the Bill. First, I must mention the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton), who has done the House a great service by raising the issue of how best we protect our children. He made some extremely powerful points, and spoke about the large numbers of children who live away from home in boarding schools, foster care or whatever. That is a huge problem, and we have only to look at some of the alarming things that have happened in recent history to realise that the hon. Gentleman has done the House a service.

The hon. Member also referred to the second part of the Bill, which will have to be considered in some detail in Committee. He underlined the need for that consideration when he said that the House resents it when a Committee does not have the time and opportunity to consider a matter, as was the case with the amendment to the Crime and Disorder Bill. Now we have an opportunity to consider a Bill properly, and some time will have to be spent on that detailed consideration.

The short but powerful speech by the hon. Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham) amply supported the case for detailed consideration. He clearly wants to go into detail about the adequacy of the maximum sentence proposed in the Bill, as well as about other important issues. He spoke powerfully about his experience, as someone professionally involved in the resulting cases, of the terrible consequences of abuse in children's homes.

The hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) made a considered speech. I did not agree with his general point of view, but his well-thought-out speech went into some important points of detail, especially concerning the defences that would be available under both parts of the Bill. The points that he made on the statutory defence, the anomalies on sentencing and the sex offenders register constituted a strong case for detailed consideration of the second part.

Labour Members spoke in support of lowering the age of consent, with the exception of the hon. Member for Ipswich (Mr. Cann). I join the hon. Member for Harrow, East in saying that, although I do not agree entirely with that hon. Gentleman's speech—my reasons for voting against the Bill will be different from his—I know a courageous speech when I hear one. The House should recognise that the hon. Member for Ipswich made a courageous speech.

I do not agree with the point of view of the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ann Keen), but I acknowledge that she made a sincere and passionate speech, as she did in our previous debate on the subject when she moved the amendment to the Crime and Disorder Bill. I acknowledge her sincere approach to these issues.

I approach all our debates and decisions on moral issues with a certain amount of humility. I am not one of those who like to give people great lectures about how they should run their lives. I accept, however, that, on this occasion, like every other hon. Member, I am called upon to exercise my judgment and do what I as an individual think is right.

In 1994, I voted to reduce the age of consent from 21 to 18. I thought then that there was a strong case for such a change. I hope that I will be acquitted of any suggestion that I am against homosexuals or trying to condemn homosexuality. I am thinking about what is the appropriate age of consent. I have listened carefully to all the arguments that have been made in favour of lowering it, but I am far less convinced of the case for reduction to 16 than I was of the case for reduction to 18.

I feel—as many members of the public do, if surveys are to be believed—that 16 is too young for something of this importance. The Home Secretary earlier cited with approval—rightly, I believe—the Wolfenden report, which, as he acknowledged, brought about a sea change in these matters. He made it clear—and I agree with him—that, before the report and the changes that it eventually brought about, there was huge unhappiness. Other hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Witney, have acknowledged the same point.

I look back to Wolfenden, which ushered in an age of tolerance of homosexuality, to see exactly what it said about the age of consent. That report can certainly be acquitted of any suggestion of being anti-homosexual. What did it say? We know that it set the age of consent at 21. Some members of the committee favoured 18, but the view taken on the age of 16 as an age of consent was clear:

> "While there are some grounds for fixing the age as low as sixteen, it is obvious that however 'mature' a boy of that age may be as regards physical development or psycho-sexual make-up, and whatever analogies may be drawn from the law relating to offences against young girls, a boy is incapable, at the age of sixteen, of forming a mature judgment about actions of a kind which might have the effect of setting him apart from the rest of society."

We all know that society has changed a great deal since 1957, but there is still some merit in that approach. Actions of that type would, at the very least, have profound consequences for a young person that could follow him for the rest of his life. In a matter of such importance, it is not too much to ask someone to wait until he is 18 before he is able to take such a step. A large section of public opinion shares that view on the appropriate age of consent.

There are people who, for various reasons, are anti-homosexual. There is a section of opinion that is, as some hon. Members would put it, prejudiced. However, a much larger element of public opinion feels some unease on this subject, and feels that 18 is a more appropriate age than 16. The public are far more tolerant than they once were of gay life styles and so forth, but even among those tolerant people who wish to treat homosexual people as equals, there remains unease at the prospect of lowering the age of consent from 18 to 16. I share that concern.

[Mr. James Clappison]

My hon. Friend the Member for Witney spoke of Enoch Powell and of the protection of minorities. We should not, he said, slavishly follow the enfranchised majority. That is a fair point; Enoch Powell made a memorable speech—about capital punishment, I think—on whether Members of Parliament should or should not, when called on to exercise their individual consciences, have any regard for public opinion. It is an interesting question, but I shall not go into it now.

I believe, however, that public opinion should be listened to on this matter. The public have it right: no matter how much people may wish to tolerate homosexuality and accord equality to it, a large element of public opinion is uneasy about the step we are considering. People are concerned that 16 is simply too young, and believe that 18 is more appropriate. It would be a mistake, and it would not be good for young people, so soon after Parliament had reduced the age from 21 to 18 to reduce it still further to an age that many people—myself included—regard as too young.

9.43 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): The House has heard a good debate in which a topic that arouses deep feelings has been discussed with seriousness and passion. Feelings are deep on both sides of the House, among those who are for and against the Bill, and feelings also run deep in the country. It is right that we should have a free vote, and I shall vote, as I always have, for the equalisation of the age of consent at 16. Each of us must approach this issue informed by our consciences, our experience and our personal views.

It is interesting that hon. Members both for and against the Bill have felt able to talk about faith, and about love. That does the House great credit.

As we move forward in this process, it is important that we continue, both on the Floor of the House and in Committee, to approach the topic in a way that does not harden attitudes or alienate our fellow citizens who have strongly held views and also in a way that recognises that we are dealing with a subject that goes to the heart of people's very existence. During the debate, hon. Members have mentioned the anguish that individuals and their families feel as they approach their own sexuality and its impact on themselves and on those they love.

The Bill falls into two distinct parts. We owe a debt of gratitude to my hon. Friends the Members for Bassetlaw (Mr. Ashton), for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Mrs. Golding)—she could not be present tonight for reasons that we all know and understand—and for Brentford and Isleworth (Ann Keen) for enabling us to examine the Bill in this way and to give it the detailed consideration that it deserves.

The first part of the Bill deals with the age of consent, which is a matter of principle and, for many hon. Members who spoke, is very much a matter of equality before the law. The second part, quite differently, deals with abuse of trust and must be seen as part of the Government's much wider work—how we protect children and vulnerable people—and I am glad it enjoys the support of both sides of the House. That is a top priority for the Government.

My hon. Friends the Members for Salford (Ms Blears) and for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes) said that it is important that we recognise the significance of what we are doing in terms of that wider programme of work on the "Quality Protects" initiative, the children's safeguards review and our response to that. During the review of sexual offences that we announced earlier, we will ensure that the goal of protection from abuse is the paramount goal for the criminal law in that area. Nothing must be subordinated to it.

We must ensure that we prevent unsuitable people from working with children. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced earlier, we will make available the report of the group of experts that we asked to examine the matter to ensure that we work out the details of an integrated scheme to protect vulnerable people and children as a matter of priority. We have to do so not because we are discussing the equalisation of the age of consent today, but because it is the right thing to do. It was always the right thing to do and it has been neglected for far too long.

Also, we must deal with the wider issues that have been raised in the debate, particularly, but not exclusively, by those who oppose equalisation of the age of consent, saying that it is the thin end of the wedge. That point was made by the hon. Members for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) and for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis).

My hon. Friend the Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham) expressed concern about the importance of ensuring that we get the penalties right in cases of abuse of trust. I am here to assure him, first, that we are determined to ensure that the provisions contained in the Bill on abuse of trust are clearly understood to refer to consensual activity. With the sort of activities that he described—rape and indecent assault—it is right that the full penalties invoked by the law for such offences should apply. The Bill deals with abuse of trust in relation to consensual acts. I am sure that he appreciates the difference. That is precisely the sort of matter that we will discuss in Committee.

The same is true of the matters of detail raised by the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris). They properly relate to the wider issues of equality dealt with by our review of sexual offences. The review again seeks to build a broad consensus in our society that recognises deeply held feelings and the issues of faith and belief that inform all hon. Members in their approach to the subject.

On the thin-end-of-the-wedge argument, let me make this crystal clear: the Government are wholly opposed to any further reduction in the age of consent for either sex. We will not countenance a reduction to 14, 12 or any of the other ages mentioned with reference to our European neighbours.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Boateng: Not at the moment.

This is not about encouraging teenage sex but about ensuring that the law is fair and seen to be fair. We know that the criminal law is a blunt and often deeply

unsatisfactory instrument in dealing with the difficult and complex issues raised by teenage sexuality. It would be folly to pretend otherwise.

Mr. Gray: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Boateng: Not at the moment.

The hon. Member for New Forest, East asked about the mental state of a young man who committed suicide when he had only to wait another 18 months or so. My response is this: what sort of society allows a young man to get into that frame of mind in the first place? We must ensure that, as a society, we recognise the impact on the mental health of the young people concerned. The House will wish to consider that. While we must be concerned about AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases, I ask hon. Members, who I know hold their views in all sincerity, to bear that in mind in examining the measure's health implications. Their arguments are not supported by the British Medical Association or those who have an interest in, or who spend their professional lives tackling, issues of adolescent sexual health.

I want to move on to abuse of trust. We want to ensure that the Bill has a proportionate response to the concerns expressed in the debate, both here and in another place last summer. It was a fundamental principle in considering the new protections proposed in the Bill that they should be wholly non-discriminatory. I believe that we have achieved that end.

The new offence is a useful additional means of addressing concern about the lack of a suitable range of protection for vulnerable 16 and 17-year-olds of both sexes. It must form part of a wider programme of work, both statutory and non-statutory. It is in that context that we will address the codes of practice that are so important in ensuring that we reflect the concerns raised by several hon. Members, not least the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith), who mentioned the impact of the abuse of trust provision on the professions. We believe that it is necessary that the provision should apply to teachers, because teachers stand in loco parentis: that is what distinguishes them from the members of various other professions who also exercise a degree of care and responsibility over children and young people. That is why we have included teachers as we have. There is room for discussion with the professions on the code of practice and we intend that that discussion should take place.

It is important to recognise what lies behind the marriage exception, a subject raised by the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon. He has to understand that the marriage exception is a specific reflection of the importance and special status that the European convention on human rights gives to marriage. It would be wrong if, in the provisions relating to abuse of trust, no reference was made to marriage. It must be emphasised and clearly understood that the provision does not in any way excuse abuses of trust prior to marriage.

Mr. Bermingham: Given what Ministers have said about the points relating to abuse that I raised earlier and about the codes of practice, is the Minister saying that he and the Government have an open mind on the whole subject of the codes of practice, penalties and the way in which abuse is dealt with?

Mr. Boateng: I assure my hon. Friend that those are indeed matters which we shall examine in Committee and during our consultations and discussions with the professions. We need to get it right, because our first duty is to the children and young people who will be most affected by the legislation.

Tonight has been a night of speeches that reflect the concern about the issues that is felt in the wider community. We approach the subject from the perspective, not only of rights, but of responsibilities. We have to get the balance right between rights and responsibilities. One word has not been mentioned as often as it might have been: we have heard about tolerance, which is important; but even more important than tolerance is respect—respect for difference and respect for institutions that contain individuals who have a particular responsibility of trust in connection with children and vulnerable people. The debate is about rights and responsibilities, but, above all, it is about respect—respect for one another, respect for childhood and the vulnerability that comes with childhood.

If we get the balance right and if hon. Members bear that in mind when they cast their vote tonight and subsequently, we stand a good chance of getting the legislation right. There is a great deal riding on our getting it right, for, if we get it wrong, the consequences for many vulnerable and young people will be extremely serious. Tonight, I shall vote in support of the Bill. Hon. Members have an opportunity to make up their own mind. I have no doubt that they will do the right thing.

Question put, That the Bill be now read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 313, Noes 130.

Division No. 46] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick	Borrow, David
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*	Boswell, Tim
Allan, Richard	Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Allen, Graham	Bradshaw, Ben
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*	Brake, Tom
Armstrong, Ms Hilary	Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy	Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Ashton, Joe	Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Atherton, Ms Candy	Browne, Desmond
Atkins, Charlotte	Buck, Ms Karen
Austin, John	Burden, Richard
Ballard, Jackie	Burgon, Colin
Barnes, Harry	Butler, Mrs Christine
Barron, Kevin	Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Bayley, Hugh	Cable, Dr Vincent
Beard, Nigel	Caborn, Richard
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret	Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Begg, Miss Anne	Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Beith, Rt Hon A J	Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony	Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Bennett, Andrew F	Campbell-Savours, Dale
Bermingham, Gerald	Canavan, Dennis
Berry, Roger	Caplin, Ivor
Best, Harold	Casale, Roger
Betts, Clive	Cawsey, Ian
Blears, Ms Hazel	Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Blunkett, Rt Hon David	Chaytor, David
Boateng, Paul	Chidgey, David

Chisholm, Malcolm
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Cosker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Ms Julia
Duncan, Alan
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Elman, Mrs Louise
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Gorrie, Donald
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heath, Rt Hon Sir Edward
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Key, Robert
Kidney, David
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L.
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sanders, Adrian
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stott, Roger
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Swinney, John
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vaz, Keith
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Willis, Phil
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Ann Keen and
Mr. Shaun Woodward.

NOES

Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Baldry, Tony
Begg, Roy
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benton, Joe
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Butterfill, John
Cann, Jamie
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Dalyell, Tam
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen

Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gill, Christopher
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Johnson Smith,
Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maginnis, Ken
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paisley, Rev Ian
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Pollard, Kerry
Powell, Sir Raymond
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rogers, Allan
Rowe, William *(E Londy)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thompson, William
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Wareing, Robert N
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Wilkinson, John
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Edward Leigh and
Dr. Julian Lewis.

Question accordingly agreed to.
Bill read a Second time.
Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63(3) (Committal of Bills),

That Clause 1 of the Bill be committed to a Committee of the whole House;

That the remainder of the Bill be committed to a Standing Committee;

That when the provisions of the Bill considered, respectively, by the Committee of the whole House and by the Standing Committee have been reported to the House, the Bill shall be proceeded with as if the Bill had been reported as a whole to the House from the Standing Committee.—[*Mrs. McGuire.*]

Question agreed to.

Committee tomorrow.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Thursday 28th January, notwithstanding Standing Order No. 16 (Proceedings under an Act or on European Union documents), the Speaker shall put the Questions on the Motions in the name of Mr. Secretary Darling relating to Social Security and Pensions not later than Seven o'clock.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

DEREGULATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 18(1)(a) (Consideration of draft deregulation orders),

Weights and Measures

That the draft Deregulation (Weights and Measures) Order 1999, which was laid before this House on 14th December 1998, be approved.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Question agreed to.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Mrs. Virginia Bottomley be discharged from the Foreign Affairs Committee and Mr. Shaun Woodward be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. McWilliam, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.]*

SOCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Mr. Michael Foster (Hastings and Rye) be discharged from the Social Security Committee and Dr. Doug Naysmith be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. McWilliam, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.]*

Iraq

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

10.15 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow) *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Would Members leaving do so quietly, please? *[Interruption.]* Order. We are still doing business here.

Mr. Dalyell: I would not have raised in the House the first aspect of sanctions against Iraq—the subject of the Adjournment debate—had it not appeared in the front of a national newspaper this morning. I refer to the relationship between UNSCOM and those who are responsible for UNSCOM. It was asserted that there were working for UNSCOM those who reported to American intelligence and to British intelligence.

At first hand, some seven weeks ago, I went along with Mr. Bill Griffin and the former Irish Taoiseach, Albert Reynolds, and persuaded them to go to UNSCOM when we were in Baghdad. I can only report to the House what happened. I asked whether it was true that Mr. Scott Ritter was, as an ex-Marine, reporting information from a United Nations organisation to the United States. The answer was that he was, and that other members of UNSCOM were ashamed of him. Then I heard Albert Reynolds ask some very strong questions about the relationship between UNSCOM inspectors and their own nation states, and the long and the short of it was that, going out of the room, one of the non-American, non-British officials turned round to me and said, "You British cannot be quite so relaxed about this."

On further inquiry, the clear implication was that British officials were indeed reporting to the British Government or—as the press would have it—MI6. If that is so, it is a major undermining of the United Nations. I have given notice of the question. I did not want to make it a matter of public record because it is a delicate and embarrassing subject, but now that it has appeared on the front pages of the press I invite the Government to make some comment on the matter.

Secondly, I shall refer briefly to the statement of Archbishop Edwin O'Brien, the archbishop of the archdiocese for the United States military services, who said that US bombing of Iraq is morally questionable and that US military personnel should question their actions if ordered to take an action that is a clear

"violation of the moral law."

Archbishop O'Brien is quoted as having said to the Catholic chaplains serving in the US armed forces throughout the world that soldiers, airmen, seamen and Marines

"are not exempt from making conscientious decisions"

when confronted with immoral orders. He said:

"I join the bishops of our country as well as the concerned voices of the Holy See and other hierarchies in calling on our president and his advisers to initiate no further military action in the Middle East".

Mr. George Galloway (Glasgow, Kelvin): On the subject of the mounting international opposition to British and American policy, has my hon. Friend had the chance, as I have this evening, to hear the reports coming from Cairo, where the Arab Foreign Ministers are meeting, where, this very afternoon, the Egyptian—friendly Egypt—Foreign Minister, Amr Moussa, had a meeting, indeed an altercation, with the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Fatchett), in which he warned him not to take comfort from Iraq's leaving of the Foreign Ministers' summit because, he said, the Arab Foreign Ministers are unequivocally against any further bombing of Iraq and unequivocally in favour of an early lifting of sanctions?

Mr. Dalyell: There we have the chaplain general of United States forces and the Foreign Minister of friendly Egypt coming to parallel conclusions—chiming with each other. We ought surely to take notice.

Finally, I refer to the statement given at Harvard in November by Denis Halliday, who resigned on principle from his post as UN assistant Secretary-General and chief UN relief co-ordinator for Iraq in protest at the sanctions. The Foreign Office has had an opportunity to study his statement. Thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Kelvin (Mr. Galloway) and others, Mr. Halliday will be in the House tomorrow. We shall be extremely interested to hear the Government's reply to his points.

Mr. Halliday says in his statement:

"I see the present sanctions regime representing a certain bankruptcy of ideas, simplistic, unsuccessful, without the desired results."

He continues:

"By denying access to oil sales funds necessary to invest in adequate food intake, a balanced diet, in health care, particularly preventive health care, the provision of electric power, and in the availability of potable water, the absence of which kills Iraqi children in large numbers."

Mr. Halliday asserts that

"the monthly death rate of children under five attributable to sanctions ranges from six to seven thousand per month".

I repeat, 6,000 to 7,000 infants per month.

I am grateful to the Under-Secretary at the Department for International Development for being present. I have a high regard for that Department and what it has done, but the entire Government and all of us should reflect on what those figures mean. Sanctions are responsible for the deaths of 6,000 to 7,000 Iraqi children a month, in the view of the former UN co-ordinator.

Mr. Halliday goes on to say:

"Continuing sanctions are biting into the fabric of Iraqi society and family behaviour."

Another phenomenon is the growth of corruption, which was largely unknown in Iraq in better times. Those phenomena are concerns of the Iraqi Government today, and already are concerns for Iraqi sociologists of the future. In such circumstances, how can Iraq return to the high moral standards that existed before the disruptions caused by the impact of sanctions?

Mr. Halliday refers to the many advances that women in Iraq had made in recent decades, which have been set back. In many individual cases, opportunities have been lost for ever. When I visited Iraq in 1994 and subsequently in November, it was clear that it was an entirely different Arab state from many. Anyone who saw

the powerful film the other night, "Murder in Purdah", about what happens in Pakistan may care to draw a contrast.

Sanctions, according to Denis Halliday, have largely prevented the reconstruction and rehabilitation of war damage and, he goes on,

"today the people of Iraq continue to suffer greatly from the lack of adequate electric power now running at less than 40 per cent. of what it was in 1990."

Mr. Halliday concludes by stating that

"sanctions continue to kill children and sustain high levels of malnutrition. Sanctions are undermining cultural and educational recovery. Sanctions will not change governance to democracy. Sanctions encourage isolation, alienation, and possibly fanaticism. Sanctions may create a danger to peace in the region and in the world. Sanctions destroy Islamic and Iraqi family values. Sanctions have undermined the advancement of women and have encouraged a massive brain drain.

Sanctions destroy the lives of children, their expectations and those of young adults. Sanctions breach the Charter of the United Nations, the Conventions of Human Rights, and the Rights of the Child. Sanctions are counterproductive, and have no positive impact on the leadership and sanctions lead to unacceptable human suffering, often of the young and innocent. As I have said already, I can find no legitimate justification for sustaining economic sanctions under these circumstances. To do so in my view is to disregard the high principles of the United Nations' Charter, the Convention of Human Rights, the very moral leadership and the credibility of the United Nations itself."

Those words were spoken by a man who has given his working life to the United Nations. He went on:

"Continuation also undermines the global role of the United States."

I should like to hear the Government's response to that distinguished Irishman, who will be here tomorrow.

10.26 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Tony Lloyd): My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) has raised a number of issues, which I shall attempt to cover. I, too, shall begin by quoting Mr. Halliday, who said in a speech that he gave at Harvard university last November:

"I am assuming that you consider it appropriate, like I do, for the United Nations to have the power and capacity to attempt to bring into line certain leadership, certain Governments, that are acting outside the bounds of behaviour acceptable to the other Member States."

If that is common ground among those in this House, we must examine precisely what mechanisms are available to the United Nations and to us as part of the international community.

Sanctions were imposed following Iraq's brutal and unprovoked attack on Kuwait in 1990. At the end of the Gulf war in 1991, Iraq accepted the terms of the United Nations Security Council resolution 687, which brought about the ceasefire. That resolution and others implementing it laid down obligations on Iraq on a number of matters, including the destruction of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. It also made it clear that the Security Council would lift the sanctions imposed on Iraq as and when Iraq complied with its obligations under those resolutions.

I take the strictures from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Kelvin (Mr. Galloway) about the meeting that is taking place in Cairo, but it is only right to remind the House that, in their final statement, the Arab Foreign Ministers called for a

"diplomatic solution in implementing all relevant Security Council resolutions",

and urged

"the Iraqi Government to co-operate with the Security Council in implementing them."

They also urged the Security Council to restore the relationship between the UN and the Iraqi Government in a way that guarantees implementation of the Security Council resolutions properly and objectively.

Thus, there can be no doubt that the resolutions, and the sanctions package that is part of those resolutions, have much wider support than simply that of this House.

Mr. Galloway: It is important that no one is inadvertently misled. The statement by Arab Foreign Ministers said that they have grave concerns about the bombing of Iraq in December and called for no further bombing. It set up a deputation to go to New York to assist the French initiative to lift the economic sanctions. The Foreign Ministers are for the lifting of economic sanctions.

Mr. Lloyd: Nevertheless, the Foreign Ministers are also strongly of the view that Iraq needs to conform to the UN resolutions. That is important in itself, because those resolutions commit Iraq to destroying its programme of weapons of mass destruction.

Iraq formally accepted its obligations under that and other resolutions, but its persistent failure to comply with its undertakings has prolonged the sanctions regime, which my hon. Friends urged the Government to examine in the way that they have. I must remind the House that the sanctions regime was originally envisaged as lasting only for months, not for eight years.

I must give examples of how poor Iraq's record on compliance is. Iraq did not accept the UN demarcation of the border with Kuwait until 1994. Earlier this month, Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz questioned that border and referred to parts of Kuwait as Iraqi territory. More than 600 Kuwaitis detained by Iraq during the Gulf war are still unaccounted for. Proportionately, that would be equivalent to 50,000 British citizens.

Overwhelmingly, the Kuwaiti missing are not combatants, but civilians; some are women and some are elderly. To date, Iraq has provided sufficient information to close only three of those cases. Meanwhile, the families of the those who remain unaccounted for continue to live with their uncertainty over the fate of their family members.

Persistent evasion, obstruction and, indeed, mendacity on the part of Iraq have meant that the obligations under resolution 687 relating to Iraq's weapons of mass destruction—which could have been fulfilled in a few months, if Iraq had co-operated fully with the weapons inspectors—have still not been met. Until they are, Iraq will remain a threat to regional peace and stability. Saddam Hussein has used weapons of mass destruction before, with devastating results. In the Kurdish town of Halabja, Saddam ordered the use of chemical weapons, including nerve agents. They killed between 4,000 and 5,000 civilians and injured perhaps 10,000 more.

Saddam used chemical weapons against Iran during the Iran-Iraq war. Nothing we have seen or heard from his regime over the past seven years gives us any reason to believe that he would not use them again, if he were given the opportunity.

[Mr. Lloyd]

A look at the human rights situation reminds us what sort of regime we are dealing with. The catalogue of repression and human rights violations over the years still shocks. It includes persistent torture of vocal opponents, routine use of the death penalty to deter opposition, mass executions as punishment and deterrent, relentless persecution of religious leaders, whose very existence highlights alternatives to Saddam's regime, and genocide against minorities.

Resolution 688 demands that Iraq put an end to repression and ensure respect for the political and human rights of all Iraqi citizens. Our insistence that Iraq comply with its obligations does not mean that we ignore or attempt to deny the suffering of the Iraqi people—that was an important part of the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow—but we reject the view that lays the blame for their suffering at the door of the international community rather than where it properly belongs—at the door of Saddam Hussein and his regime.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): Allowing for everything that the Minister has said, what was achieved by the bombing? Are we at war with Iraq? Is it the Government's view that Israel, Turkey or any other country in the world could use the same resolution to attack Iraq? What is the basis of Government policy, other than the fact that they follow Washington and do everything that it tells them to do?

Mr. Lloyd: My right hon. Friend would not expect me to agree with him. This is a well-travelled road and he has been along it on a number of occasions with the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and others. He well knows that the Government entered into the recent actions against Iraq, first, to deter Iraq, but also to degrade its weapons capacity. That is exactly what was achieved.

I return to sanctions, which my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow was particularly keen to discuss. Max van der Stoel, the UN rapporteur on Iraq, talked about the horrendous human rights situation in that country and recorded a catalogue of detail about continued repression and humanitarian abuse in Iraq. He talked about primary responsibility for the precarious food and health situation laying with Iraq and the report gives the reasons for that judgment: Iraq refused to take advantage of the oil for food programme for five years while failing to bring about the lifting of sanctions by refusing to fulfil its obligations.

The report also discusses Iraq's prevarication in negotiations, which caused regular interruption of oil sales, which in turn interrupted the flow of humanitarian supplies. It mentions Iraq's discrimination against those living outside Baghdad in terms of access to medical supplies, and Iraq's restrictions on UN observers of the Iraqi distribution programme, to the extent that areas designated as sensitive areas by the Iraqi Government are rarely, if ever, visited.

While Saddam's regime has allowed the Iraqi people to suffer, the international community, aware of the requirement to find effective ways to meet the needs of the Iraqi people, has sought to protect them from the effects of the embargo, and from the cynical policies of the regime. The sanctions resolutions never prohibited the import of food, medicines and other essential humanitarian supplies. The Security Council is now considering ways of further improving the oil for food programme to offset the effects on the programme of the drop in oil prices, and other ways in which more revenue can be made available for essential humanitarian supplies. Britain has contributed a number of proposals, including a proposal for the removal of the ceiling on the amount of oil that can be sold, and the speeding of approvals through the sanctions committee. We are also suggesting that the European Union should re-examine ways in which it might complement the UN programme.

While we and the rest of the international community strive to help the Iraqi people, however, Saddam has shown over the years that his only interest in the Iraqi people is as a tool of propaganda. His priorities remain to keep the regime in power, and to sustain his armed forces for continued internal repression in preparation for new foreign adventures.

Mr. Galloway: If the international community is trying so hard to shield the civilian population from the effects of the embargo, why does the Minister think that, on the reckoning of Dennis Halliday—a man living and working there—between 6,000 and 7,000 Iraqi children under five, or 250 or more every single day, are dying as a direct result of the sanctions?

Mr. Lloyd: I shall come to that precise point. For a start, the Iraqi Government have chosen, as I said, to ignore the opportunities presented by the oil for food programme. For example, they refuse—despite constant encouragement from the United Nations—to make any effort to prioritise properly what is purchased for the humanitarian programme, or to target the programme on the most vulnerable. They have, for instance, persistently refused to implement targeted feeding programmes for infants, despite evidence of infant malnutrition; nor do they make any attempt to improve the distribution system for humanitarian goods inside Baghdad-controlled Iraq.

It is noticeable that oil for food has had a substantially greater impact on the humanitarian situation in northern Iraq, where the programme is outside the control of Baghdad. We know that the Iraqi Government smuggle large quantities of oil products out of the country for illegal sale. The proceeds of that go to Saddam and his regime, rather than benefiting his long-suffering people.

Let us look at the way in which Iraq tries to prioritise spending of oil for food money. The Iraqi distribution plan for the present six-month phase in the programme allocates less food than it did when the programme was worth only $2 billion; it is now worth some $5.3 billion. It reduces the daily food ration from 2,200 calories to 2,050, and reduces spending on medicine.

The answer to my hon. Friend's question is that this is political choice made by Saddam Hussein against his own people. That is an undeniable consequence of the way in which he manipulates those programmes.

Let me say a word about the United Kingdom's response. We have taken the lead at the UN in piloting and developing the oil for food arrangements, and seeking to ensure that the revenue is put to proper use. UK direct aid to Iraq continues. Since 1991, Britain has given more than £73 million in aid to Iraq. Our share of European Union spending over the same period amounts to some £23 million. That makes us one of the largest contributors

of aid to Iraq. In March last year, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development announced a new £7 million programme for humanitarian assistance to the people of Baghdad-controlled Iraq. That is in addition to programmes amounting to some £3 million a year, concentrating on northern Iraq, and focusing on the vulnerable and on assistance to mine-affected communities.

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): If my hon. Friend's argument is that Saddam Hussein is so hostile to his own people that he wants to see them die, why are our western Governments helping him to achieve that aim?

Mr. Lloyd: The aim of the west is to help the Iraqi people through the oil for food programme. That programme is there if Saddam chooses to use it. We know that Saddam prostitutes that programme. We know, for example, that he sought to buy equipment that is totally irrelevant; indeed, it has been blocked by the sanctions committee of the UN because it is irrelevant to the needs of his people. He does not choose to prioritise the poor, or the malnourished children, whose plight my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow has rightly raised, and whom the oil for food programme aims to help.

It is certainly true that Britain has led consideration of the debate—a debate that still continues—as to how we make the programme more effective, but the choices that lie behind the programme are the choices made by Saddam Hussein—choices where he chooses to punish his own people, not to give and offer them the assistance that is available under the programme.

Mr. Robert Marshall-Andrews (Medway): I do not know who wrote the Minister's brief, but will he not answer the main thrust of the point that is made: sanctions are a political weapon? They are not designed to hurt, or to destroy the people in a country. They are designed to destabilise the Government against whom they are made. There is no evidence whatever to suggest that sanctions have done that in the case of Iraq—quite the reverse. Sanctions are being relentlessly used as an alibi for Saddam Hussein's regime.

We who support the moves need no lectures on the iniquity of that regime—quite the reverse. We are the first people to condemn it, but will my hon. Friend not understand the point and thrust of the argument? The resolutions have manifestly not only failed to work—that is not a problem—but sustained the very regime that they are designed to bring down. That is the point that we ask him to address: not the iniquity of the regime, not the fact that Saddam is using sanctions as an alibi, but how we in the west are supposed to stop him from doing so.

Mr. Lloyd: I simply reject what my hon. and learned Friend has said. The same argument was used about sanctions against South Africa. It has been used consistently where sanctions have been applied against a regime, but, of course, the sanctions on Iraq are designed to prevent the build-up of weapons of mass destruction, and to prevent the functioning of that military regime.

It is precisely because there is within the sanctions regime an oil for food programme, which allows food and medicines to be purchased by Iraq, that Saddam chooses not to purchase those. It is Saddam himself who prostitutes the regime to penalise his people and to maintain political pressure on his own people. That is where the fault and injustice lie.

I am conscious that I must deal with an issue of particular importance which my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow has raised: the newspaper allegation, printed, I think, in *The Independent on Sunday*. He would not expect me to comment on stories about the intelligence services. That policy has been adopted by British Governments over a long period, but I can say—it will deal with the point that he raises and the substance of the newspaper article—that UNSCOM is entitled to seek information and advice from all possible sources in pursuit of its mandate to destroy Iraq's weapons of mass destruction capability. However, UNSCOM executive chairman Richard Butler has made it clear that he has always insisted on all UNSCOM activity being carried out strictly in pursuit of its disarmament mandate, not to benefit any individual member state.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Fatchett), has stated clearly:

"The UK Government has made clear that all information exchanges between the UK and UNSCOM have been strictly in pursuit of UNSCOM's mandate to dismantle Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction capability."

There is no truth in the allegation that British people seconded to UNSCOM were there for the purpose of spying. I hope that that is the reassurance that my hon. Friend wants. It is clear and unequivocal.

Mr. Dalyell: Will my hon. Friend find out about the role of the name that I have given him?

Mr. Lloyd: The name that my hon. Friend has given me is of one of the people seconded to UNSCOM, but what I have said generally about British secondees to UNSCOM applies equally to that individual.

We are working with partners in the Security Council to establish a new consensus on the way forward. That must address the continuing need for Iraq to fulfil its obligations on weapons of mass destruction. We are also looking at how to encourage humanitarian assistance—

The motion having been made after Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MADAM SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at fifteen minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 26 January 1999

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Housing

1. **Mrs. Rosemary McKenna** (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth): What steps are being taken to deal with the problems faced by owner-occupiers in housing regeneration and improvement schemes. [65825]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Calum Macdonald): At present, local authorities can give grants to owner-occupiers to assist with the cost of repairs. The forthcoming Green Paper on housing will consider the housing needs of all tenures, including owner-occupiers. It will be the first Green Paper on housing in 20 years, and is proof of the Government's commitment to achieving better housing in Scotland. From 1 July, it will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Mrs. McKenna: Will my hon. Friend the Minister join me in congratulating North Lanarkshire council's housing department, which this morning received a charter mark award in the presence of the Prime Minister? The Minister will be aware of the specific problems in Scotland's new towns, where a large percentage of owner-occupiers are in former public sector housing. Those houses were built in the 1960s and have particular problems.

Housing partnerships are the way forward in dealing with those complex issues. Cumbernauld housing partnership in my constituency is working hard to find solutions. There is one issue that I should like the Minister to look at. Will those owner-occupiers who do not maintain their properties, and therefore jeopardise their neighbours' plans to take part in the modernisation programme, be dealt with in the White Paper?

Mr. Macdonald: I am happy to congratulate North Lanarkshire council. I visited it at the charter mark award ceremony. It has done extremely well.

As my hon. Friend has pointed out, there is a problem. Local authorities have a wide range of statutory powers available to them. The powers may require some amendment. The question will be raised in the Green Paper.

Mr. Donald Gorrie (Edinburgh, West): Will the Minister follow that up by clarifying what the Government will do to help owner-occupiers in tenement areas in Scottish cities, where the main problems are that there is a lack of funding for collective repairs—the amount of money available in Edinburgh and Glasgow is about a quarter of what it was a few years ago—and compelling owner-occupiers who do not co-operate in general repairs to do so? There is a need for a legal change to provide some more money. Will the Minister clarify what he is doing about that?

Mr. Macdonald: The latter question, as I have said, will be examined in the context of the Green Paper. There is a problem. Since the dropping of ring-fencing by the previous Government, the amount of money going to owner-occupiers has fallen dramatically. That is something that we will also look at in the context of the Green Paper.

Mr. John Swinney (North Tayside): Does the Minister recognise that one of the problems affecting owner-occupiers is the higher mortgage payments by owner-occupiers in the eurozone? Is he aware that the average owner-occupier in Scotland will pay £1,400 more in mortgage repayments because Britain is outwith the single European currency? What is he going to do about it?

Mr. Macdonald: The Government have already introduced various measures to try to help with mortgages. We have talked to lenders to encourage them to provide flexible mortgages and mortgage insurance. That has been welcomed by those holding mortgages.

Nurses

2. **Mr. Tony Worthington** (Clydebank and Milngavie): If he will make a statement about the supply of nurses in Scotland. [65826]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Sam Galbraith): The supply of and demand for nurses and midwives in Scotland is assessed annually, taking account of employers' expectations over a five-year horizon. This year, the intake to nurse training courses will be increased in accordance with the findings of last year's assessment. A new assessment for 1999 is about to be launched.

Currently, the vacancy rate is around 3 per cent., part of which is turnover. At present, there are 1.7 suitably qualified applicants for every place available for nursing or midwifery training courses. From 1 July 1999, that will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Mr. Worthington: Can my hon. Friend confirm that it is a good time to go into nursing because the role of nurses is being redefined, particularly in primary care groups? Their role will be one of leadership rather than of following, and they will have a much broader and more enhanced role.

Will my hon. Friend encourage health boards to place less reliance on agency nurses in their staffing of hospitals, because the quality of the service is bound to fall if staffing is too tight and agency nurses are used too often?

Mr. Galbraith: Although the use of agency nurses is low in Scotland, it is being reviewed with the option of

reducing it even further. My hon. Friend is correct: it is a good time to go into nursing. The nursing profession is enhancing its role and developing new tasks: nurse practitioners, nurse consultants, triaging and handling casualty. They play a vast leadership role, not just in the hospital sector, but in primary care groups, primary care trusts and other sectors. They have a vast horizon ahead of them. I welcome all the nurses and hope that the package that we are putting together in discussion with them will lead to an even greater number of nurses applying for the places available.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): What is the total cost of the Minister's bureaucratic reorganisation of the health service in Scotland? How many extra nurses could he employ by saving that money?

Mr. Galbraith: The reorganisation involves no costs. The savings produced by reducing the number of trusts by almost half are £18 million and the total savings from slashing the bureaucracy imposed by the previous Government are £100 million.

Mr. John McAllion (Dundee, East): We are told that under capitalism supply will always increase to meet demand, but as the national health service is a socialist enterprise, does my hon. Friend agree that the only sure way of increasing the supply of nurses is to pay them the full rate for the job? We had 18 years of Tory government boosting the pay of the police and the armed forces. Can we have the next 18 years of socialist government boosting the pay of nurses, doctors, social workers, teachers and public sector workers that make up the fabric of our still too neglected welfare state?

Mr. Galbraith: My hon. Friend is right. One of the great assets of the NHS is that it is a system based on need and free at the point of delivery. Its staff are part of the reason that it delivers so well and that is why the Government seek to ensure that their contribution is recognised and rewarded. We trust that the review body's recommendations will recognise the value of nurses and others in a way that the Government can afford.

War Memorials

3. **Mr. Robert Maclennan** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): If he will make a statement on the Government's policy towards the maintenance, repair and protection of Scottish war memorials. [65827]

The Minister for Home Affairs and Devolution, Scottish Office (Mr. Henry McLeish): Responsibility for the maintenance, repair and protection of a war memorial lies with the owner, or the body in which it is vested. Local authorities are responsible for the war memorials that they own. I expect them to take that duty seriously and I shall take steps to draw the matter to their attention.

Mr. Maclennan: I thank the Minister for that reply. Is he aware that the sacrifice made by the young is still strongly felt in the highland communities and the long list of the dead is still a reminder in the heart of every parish? Will he remind the Highland regional council that it is entrusted with the safekeeping of our memorials and that it is inappropriate for it to have made no budgetary provisions for their upkeep? Furthermore, will he give an assurance that the modest sums at stake are not used as a pawn in arguments between central and local government about spending requirements?

Mr. McLeish: I concur with those comments. It is a serious matter. Let me take the opportunity to acknowledge that war memorials are important to every family and community in Scotland and to the country at large. Given that we are 80 years on from the end of the 1914–18 war, it is absolutely right that we should acknowledge that. Let me reassure the right hon. Gentleman that I take the matter seriously. I shall take it up with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and with the Highland regional council. It is not an issue that requires large expense in many communities, but there is a facility that provides the powers to the local authorities that own war memorials. However, the collective view of the House should be that war memorials should be taken seriously and I shall pursue the matter. After 1 July 1999, it will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

I hope that the Scottish Parliament will want to look again at the relevant legislation as we cannot sacrifice the war memorials that fulfil an important function in society.

Mr. John Home Robertson (East Lothian): Will my hon. Friend pay special attention to the commemoration of Scots who died while serving with units based in other parts of the United Kingdom, and English, Welsh and Irish service men who died on active service with Scottish units during two world wars? Will he comment briefly on the extraordinary statement of Colonel Stuart Crawford, the SNP defence spokesperson, who said that the Scots guards who are commemorated on so many Scottish war memorials are

"a quasi-mercenary regiment . . . tainted by their association with England"?

Mr. McLeish: However tempted I may be, I do not want to go too far down that road. Suffice it to say that the SNP defence policy is a shambles and we should not spoil the discussion of an important issue with such comments. People who lose their lives in war, no matter what their nationality, should be commemorated. We have proud traditions in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England regarding that. It is the collective wish of the House that we register that concern today and send a message to every council and every owner of a war memorial that they should ensure that they are kept in a proper state of repair. Communities demand that and the House should reflect that concern.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): The Minister will recall that although the Ministry of Defence could not pardon those soldiers who were killed—wrongly, in the opinion of many—because they seemed to have deserted their posts in the first world war, there was a suggestion that their names could be put on war memorials. Has that been followed up in Scotland?

Mr. McLeish: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. However, my colleagues at the Ministry of Defence, including my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, will want to look at his comments in the *Official Report* and respond to him.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): I am sure that the Minister—unlike the Scottish National party—would

agree that the best way to commemorate those who died in the service of their country, and those who believe in the United Kingdom, is to maintain Scotland's role in the national defence of the whole UK. In view of that, can the Minister tell us what case Scottish Office Ministers have put to the Ministry of Defence that the Royal Ordnance factory at Bishopton should be kept open?

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman's question is totally out of order. It does not relate to Scottish war memorials. I understand that the hon. Gentleman wants to ask another question.

Dr. Fox *indicated dissent.*

Madam Speaker: In that case, we shall move on.

Hospital Expenditure

4. **Dr. Gavin Strang** (Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh): If he will make a statement on the planned levels of expenditure on hospital services over the next three years. [65828]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Donald Dewar): We plan to increase net revenue expenditure on hospital and community health services to almost £4 billion a year by 2001–02. That is part of an overall health service expenditure figure of £5.5 billion. We are investing to create a world-class NHS and putting in place the reforms and resources to make that happen.

Of course, from 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Dr. Strang: I welcome the hundreds of millions of pounds of additional money that Labour is putting into our hospital service. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it takes more than bricks and mortar to make a good hospital? As we await the outcome of the nurses' pay review, does he recognise that it is high time that nurses and other hospital staff obtained the recognition that they deserve for the excellent work that they do?

Mr. Dewar: My hon. Friend will recognise that a pay review body report is pending, and we will know shortly the specific recommendations that the body has made as a result of what I hope has been a careful and sympathetic examination of the situation. Obviously, we will then make an announcement as a Government. I agree about the fundamental importance of staff morale, and about the enormous contribution that not just nurses, but paramedics, the professions allied to medicine, doctors and a range of health service personnel make towards a service that we are determined to keep in first-class order—providing a service on the basis of need, irrespective of the patient's income. We are fortunate in Scotland that, in the year 1999–2000, we anticipate spending about £961 per head for every person in Scotland, which is 20 per cent. above the average for the rest of the country.

Mr. Michael Moore (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): Will the Secretary of State consider putting some of those resources into the casualty units in Scotland? Is he aware of the survey by the Scottish Association of Health Councils—carried out in casualty units across Scotland yesterday—which came out with alarming statistics showing the length of time that people are having to wait in casualty units, including an 88-year-old patient at the Western infirmary in Glasgow, who waited on a trolley for four hours and ten minutes with a broken leg? Will the right hon. Gentleman consider putting more resources into collecting proper information on casualty units and other difficult issues such as bed blocking, because it looks increasingly that when the Government are embarrassed about an issue, they stop collecting the relevant information?

Mr. Dewar: I assure the hon. Gentleman that we collect the information, which is published periodically. I am sorry that he asked the question in the way that he did. I accept entirely his point about the particular patient and the incident covered in the press release from the Scottish Association of Health Councils. In fairness, the hon. Gentleman should have recorded the fact that although the association pointed to local pressures, it came to this conclusion:

"Our survey clearly shows that there are significant problems in some parts of the country but there is no crisis."

It would have been fairer, and a little better for the hon. Gentleman's reputation, if he had made that clear.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Greater Glasgow health board and East Dumbartonshire council on the funding and joint planning arrangement that they have agreed for Lenzie hospital? Given that hospital's service to elderly people, the expansion that is envisaged and the provision of facilities for my constituents and those of my hon. Friends the Members for Strathkelvin and Bearsden (Mr. Galbraith) and for Cumbernauld and Kilsyth (Mrs. McKenna), does he agree that community care can be seen to work if there is a positive attitude, with proper funding and the political will to achieve it?

Mr. Dewar: I agree wholeheartedly. I know that my right hon. Friend, as a local Member of Parliament, has been very much involved in the process whereby the health service, local government and the community have worked together to accommodate change that is right but that, had it not been handled co-operatively, might have led to difficulties, frustrations and problems for individual patients and their families. That co-operative spirit is very important, as is the fact that, if the present plans are carried through—and they certainly will be if Labour Members have anything to do with it—the reforms and modernisation that are required in the health service will take place, against the background of substantial real-terms increases in expenditure, which will mean an enormous amount to patients and health service staff.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): Will the Secretary of State confirm that Consort Healthcare, the private finance initiative consortium, paid £12 million for the three sites of Edinburgh Royal infirmary, but that the surveyors, D. M. Hall, have estimated the value at £70 million without planning permission or up to £200 million with it? Does he agree that, if those sums were realised, it would be a major scandal? If £70 million

were to be realised for the sites, what percentage would be returned to the health trust, in the form of any overage agreement?

Mr. Dewar: The hon. Gentleman's enthusiasm is running away with him. I assure him that his facts are simply wrong. On the various sites that were part of the package—very sensibly, because they are surplus to requirement and it makes sense to realise their full market value as part of the cost of building the Royal Edinburgh infirmary—there were two valuations, by the district valuer and by Ryden International. In both cases, the price paid was fully in line with the market value of the estimates. The figure mentioned by the hon. Gentleman is totally a figment of his imagination or that of those who—

Mr. Salmond: It is in the newspapers.

Mr. Dewar: Before he quotes newspaper reports, the hon. Gentleman should go to the health board, for example, to discuss the situation and find out the facts. Then he would not be in a position to spread irresponsible scare stories, as he has done. As he would know if he had consulted the contract, if there are unexpected planning gains for those who have taken over the sites, the profits will be capped and there will be a claw back.

Mr. Ernie Ross (Dundee, West): My right hon. Friend and his ministerial team are very welcome to come back to Dundee, especially if they make announcements such as the one that was made at the start of the month, which will ensure that the purpose-built palliative care unit at Roxburgh house in Dundee can be replaced at the same time as the day-care centre for cancer patients, giving Dundee and Tayside a modern hospice centre for those who require it.

Mr. Dewar: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and I agree with him entirely. Clearly, in a city such as Dundee, as in every part of Scotland—rural areas are as important as cities—we will do all we can to maintain and, more importantly, improve services and centre them on patients' needs. I welcome, for example, the fact that we have a new accident and emergency centre at Ninewells, which will give very good service to Dundee and its people.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): Dr. Brian Potter, the secretary of the British Medical Association in Scotland, has said that NHS management in Scotland is in "an unbelievably awful state". Dr. Keith Little, the head of accident and emergency at Edinburgh Royal infirmary, has resigned because he said that his job was impossible. Dr. Rudy Crawford at Glasgow Royal infirmary says that conditions are the worst in living memory. That is the real world of the NHS in Scotland. Does the Secretary of State accept any responsibility for the current situation, or does he intend simply to maintain that everything is all right?

Mr. Dewar: No, I am not going to maintain that everything is all right. We inherited considerable difficulties and we are setting about improving them. It will take time. As I tried to say in what I hope was a balanced approach to the audit carried out on accident and emergency centres by the Scottish Association of Health Councils, which was press released today, I certainly acknowledge that there are local pressures—there always have been. The idea that people have to wait for treatment longer on occasion than we would like at the height of the winter pressure is something that has happened in the past year and never occurred during the 18 years in which the Conservative party was in charge does not stand even a moment's examination. We are now dealing with needs and the SAHC has pointed out that the use of the word crisis is not justified. We must continue to deal with the difficulties.

We have initiated the biggest building programme ever for the national health service in Scotland and we are providing resources on a climbing scale, the like of which the NHS has not seen before. I also hope that in the near future, as a result of the findings of the pay review body, we will be able to do something to help on that side as well. The hon. Gentleman's overstatement, which is a natural ability—almost a compulsive addiction—of his, does nothing to support his case.

Housing

5. **Mr. Michael Connarty** (Falkirk, East): If he will make a statement on the development of new housing partnerships in Scotland. [65829]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Calum Macdonald): In the next three years, £278 million is being made available to develop and support new housing partnerships. The bids are being assessed by an advisory group that includes representatives from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, Scottish Homes, the Chartered Institute of Housing and the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations Ltd. From 1 July 1999, that will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Mr. Connarty: I commend my hon. Friend for the enthusiastic and imaginative way in which he has approached new partnerships in housing. I recognise that the community housing trusts will offer financial benefits to councils with high capital debts outstanding. However, will my hon. Friend ensure that councils which do not want to go down the community housing trust road because they do not have high capital debts outstanding on their housing, will not be penalised in any way because they lack the capital that they need to deal with their housing problems?

In a spirit of partnership, will my hon. Friend ensure that ballots for community housing trusts are not rigged, as Scottish Homes ballots were, and that the housing is transferred only when a majority of those balloted vote for such a transfer?

Mr. Macdonald: I can certainly give my hon. Friend the guarantees that he seeks about ballots and tenants' rights. As part of the transfer to community ownership, it is important for tenants to arrange guarantees, for example, on future rent increases and other aspects of the tenancy that they might want to retain. It is important to realise that no transfer is likely to take place in any council for two or three years. Therefore, tenants will have a long time to study any proposals. There is no question of penalising local authorities that do not want to participate.

Mr. Andrew Welsh (Angus): Instead of the Minister giving more than £1 million to Glasgow city council for

a feasibility study on the part-privatisation of its council housing stock, would it not be better to spend that money on building, maintaining and improving Glasgow council houses? When will we get more than £1 million for council house modernisation and improvement, rather than for one feasibility study?

Mr. Macdonald: Glasgow is pursuing a project which, if it succeeds, will directly empower tenants, contribute to community regeneration and bring additional money into housing to improve it. Every time the hon. Gentleman and the Scottish National party use language such as "privatisation" or "profiteering", they alienate not merely tenants who are thinking about going ahead with such projects, but the many who are already involved in housing associations and tenants' co-operatives, who are certainly not privatised or profiteering in the way that he describes. He should also check on SNP party policy on the subject. This weekend, when reading *Inside Housing*, I noted that the party's housing spokeswoman, Fiona Hyslop, said that, for the SNP,

"stock transfer is not ruled out."

There appears to be quite a lot of confusion on SNP policy. The hon. Gentleman would do best to try to sort that out.

Mr. David Marshall (Glasgow, Shettleston): Unlike the hon. Member for Angus (Mr. Welsh), I want housing standards in Glasgow to improve. I am grateful to the Minister for having taken the trouble to visit substandard and poor housing in my constituency last year. Does he agree that one legacy of the Tory Government was the large amount of BTS—below tolerable standard—housing, mainly that owned or factored by private landlords? That is unacceptable. Will he consider extending housing partnerships to include BTS housing in areas such as Govan Hill and other parts of my constituency, and to any part of Scotland where such poor quality housing still exists?

Mr. Macdonald: Local authorities are working hard to tackle the level of BTS housing. We will always assist them with such projects. On new housing partnerships, we are primarily targeting the tenanted sector, because much deterioration and neglect occurred there under the previous Government over 18 years.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): Will the Minister review the regulations that apply to partnerships? Will he ensure that, in his desire to put tenants first and let them have first say, where they are happy to maintain the local authority as landlord, there will be no distortions in funding or any temptation to go against the wishes of the tenants?

Mr. Macdonald: I repeat that no community transfer is likely until after two or three years of study of the proposals, not only by local authorities but by tenants. They can look hard at the package offered. Only at the end of that process will they be invited to vote on it. That provides a secure guarantee for tenants.

Health Care Co-operatives

6. **Mr. Malcolm Chisholm** (Edinburgh, North and Leith): When he will issue guidelines for local health care co-operatives. [65831]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Sam Galbraith): I intend to issue broad guidance for local health care co-operatives this month. From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Mr. Chisholm: I welcome the fact that the Minister has changed his mind in the week since I raised the matter in the Scottish Grand Committee. Will he ensure that social work will be fully involved in local health care co-operatives, that nursing advice and representation will be guaranteed, and that there will be a significant role for members of the wider public? Will the co-operatives be dealt with in the forthcoming health Bill? When does he expect the Bill to be published? Is he sure that this last ever United Kingdom health Bill will pass through this House before health matters pass to the Scottish Parliament?

Mr. Galbraith: The purpose of local health care co-operatives is to ensure that everyone involved in the delivery of care across the spectrum is involved. That is the intention, and that is what they will deliver. There is no need to have them in the health Bill because they are not statutory bodies.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Can the Minister confirm that the cost of setting up the new primary care trusts is broadly equivalent to the cost of supplying 150 full-time, fully qualified nurses?

Mr. Galbraith: I think that the hon. Gentleman has heard earlier questions from his Front-Bench colleagues and is trying to get some drift on bureaucratic costs. I repeat that reducing the number of trusts in Scotland has saved us £18 million; over the life of the Government, reducing bureaucracy set up by his Government will save the people of Scotland £100 million, all of which can be directly put into nurses, doctors and patient care.

Domestic Violence

7. **Ms Sandra Osborne** (Ayr): If he will make a statement about the actions the Government are taking to protect the victims of domestic violence and abuse. [65832]

The Minister for Education, Scottish Office (Mrs. Helen Liddell): The campaign against domestic violence is a priority for the Government. We have established a Scottish partnership on domestic violence to report with a detailed work plan and timetable by 31 March this year. We have also embarked on a consultation exercise on preventing violence against women; a proposed action plan is intended as part of that consultation. At Christmas, a new advertising campaign was launched, aimed at raising awareness and changing attitudes. It will roll out over the next three years. From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Ms Osborne: I welcome the priority that the Government give to domestic violence. Will the Minister join me in condemning the actions of the former divisional commander of Kilmarnock police, who ordered the release of a man who had been charged with assaulting his wife, because that man was a family friend? Does she

agree that that undermines the very positive policy of Strathclyde police, whereby it is presumed that alleged perpetrators of domestic violence will be detained until their court appearances? Does she agree that while changing public attitudes is the long-term solution, Scotland has only half the refuge spaces needed? What will she do to address the shortage?

Mrs. Liddell: I share my hon. Friend's concern about the incident that was reported in the newspapers over Christmas. I know that the chief constable of Strathclyde has dealt with that matter. May I draw to my hon. Friend's attention the way in which the media covered that case? It was done in a sensible and responsible manner and the media concentrated their attention on the negative impact of domestic violence on the well-being of families in Scotland. I pay tribute to the media organisations in Scotland that have signed up to the campaign against domestic violence. It will take time to change attitudes, but it will be helpful to have the support of the community and of the media not only in news columns, but throughout.

As for the resources required to deal with domestic violence, our prime concern must be for the plight of the victims of such violence. So far, the Scottish Office has provided £200,000 to Scottish Women's Aid, the umbrella organisation for local women's groups. That includes more than £83,000 for work on developing refuge and permanent rehousing options for abused women who would otherwise be homeless. More than £111,000 has been devoted to social welfare aspects of the work of Scottish Women's Aid, and £25,000 has been provided for training. Over and above that, considerable expenditure has been incurred by the police, the justice system, the health service and others who deal with the consequences of domestic violence.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): I acknowledge and welcome the announcement that the Minister has made about the work that is being done. Does she acknowledge that when I did divorce work as a solicitor, I found that the best way of preventing domestic violence was often to have a refuge place available to which the family could be taken in an emergency? The hon. Member for Ayr (Ms Osborne) is right that the provision of such refuges is still inadequate. Can the Minister give the House a commitment to do all in her power not merely to make available £73,000, but to work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the voluntary sector to establish proper provision of refuges throughout Scotland?

Mrs. Liddell: I share the hon. Gentleman's concern on these matters. I have pointed out that £200,000 has been given to Scottish Women's Aid. Yes, the issue of refuges is serious, but we want to move to a situation in which domestic violence is so abhorrent in our society that we no longer have need of such refuges. Those in the hon. Gentleman's profession who deal with women from differing social classes also acknowledge that there has to be a multiplicity of routes to assistance for families and women who are the victims of domestic abuse.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I welcome the initiative that my hon. Friend has just mentioned. May I remind her that young victims of domestic violence and abuse are treated with considerable sympathy when they give evidence in criminal cases involving charges of abuse—sexual, physical or violent. Does she agree that the concept of a vulnerable person should be widened to give other fragile, vulnerable individuals the same protection when they give evidence in court cases? I know that my hon. Friend will say that Members of the Scottish Parliament will decide that matter, but it is an important issue.

Mrs. Liddell: My hon. Friend the Minister for Home Affairs and Devolution is currently looking at that matter. It is an issue that many who are concerned about domestic abuse take very much into account.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Given the importance of tackling domestic violence and abuse, on which there is unanimity in the House, can the Minister explain to us this afternoon why Victim Support (Scotland) has suffered a decrease in its budget despite an increase of 300 per cent. in requests for its assistance?

Mrs. Liddell: That is simply not true. I will make that point when I visit Victim Support (Scotland) on Thursday morning, accompanying the Princess Royal.

Local Government Finance (Glasgow)

8. **Mr. Ian Davidson** (Glasgow, Pollok): If he will make a statement on the local government financial settlement for Glasgow for 1999–2000. [65833]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Donald Dewar): Scottish councils will see the best financial settlement for seven years, with significant funding increases for front-line services, especially education. Glasgow's share of central Government support for 1999–2000 is set to rise in line with the Scottish average by almost 5 per cent.

Mr. Davidson: Will my right hon. Friend clarify whether that will reduce the differential that is paid by Glasgow residents over and above that which is paid by other council tax payers in Scotland? Will he do all he can to ensure that Glasgow's bearing of the metropolitan burden and its difficulties—Glasgow faces the highest rates of poverty and unemployment in Scotland—are adequately recognised in future grant settlements?

Mr. Dewar: I recognise that there are special problems in Glasgow, which is my own city. I also recognise that Glasgow gets a higher grant per head than other local authorities, although there is always an argument about whether the balance is right. The increase in guidelined expenditure in Glasgow will be £47.6 million, or 4.9 per cent., which takes the overall figure to slightly more than £1 billion. Although I am sure he is aware of it in general terms, I remind my hon. Friend that Glasgow is the major beneficiary of the safety net, which is worth about £8 million to the city this year; that the Scottish Office has made arrangements to cover the revenue costs of the transfer by Glasgow from its housing revenue account of capital costs to the general fund relating to demolished houses; and that Glasgow's schools project alone is worth

a capital equivalent of more than £130 million. We are trying to help Glasgow and recognise its problems, and we shall continue to do so.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman's constituents will be pleased with that pork barrel list of extra help for Glasgow. Will he comment on the fact that he believes that council taxes will rise by 5 per cent.—twice the rate of inflation—which surely flies in the face of the Labour Government's commitment not to put up taxes? Is he confident that Glasgow will keep to 5 per cent., given that most local authorities that have been told by the Government that they should be charging 5 per cent. extra are pushing up to 8 per cent., 9 per cent. or 10 per cent. extra? Is that to be the reality of Labour government, both national and local, in Glasgow?

Mr. Dewar: The hon. Gentleman is becoming an increasingly ridiculous figure, although, to be fair, he is trespassing into areas about which he knows little. He will remember that, under the settlements provided by the Conservative Government, the annual increase in Glasgow's council tax ran at about 20 per cent. That figure has now been halved and I hope that it will substantially decrease again this year. We are making progress and our aim is to provide the people of Glasgow with the services they deserve, while properly recognising the protection required by council tax payers. If the hon. Gentleman looked at the record, he would blush as deep a colour as his hair once was and say little about the subject and the record of the Conservative Administration.

A83 Closures (Ferry Fares)

9. **Mrs. Ray Michie** (Argyll and Bute): Pursuant to his answer of 17 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *688-89*, on the A83 closure, if he will ensure that fares on the temporarily enhanced ferry service are charged at a rate which reflects road equivalent tariff. [65834]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Calum Macdonald): Road equivalent tariff is not a system we favour generally, because, as the hon. Lady knows, there are winners and losers, depending on the length of the route. However, I recognise the difficulty she points to and I shall make available extra resources to CalMac to allow fares for heavy goods vehicles to be reduced by up to 50 per cent. at off-peak times and for other traffic by up to 25 per cent.; and there will be smaller reductions at peak times. From 1 July 1999, that will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Mrs. Michie: I am grateful to the Minister for agreeing to restructure fares, but it is not good enough. Even with a 50 per cent. reduction, fares will be far too high for a short, 20-minute, four-mile journey. Does the Minister agree that the Kintyre economy has suffered enough, with the closure of Machrihanish and the Campbeltown shipyard, farmers going to the wall and the effect on tourism? Does he accept that I am asking not for RET for the whole CalMac ferry fleet—not today, anyway—but for arrangements to cover only two or three weekends? That would make an enormous difference to local businesses and I hope that the Minister will reconsider.

Mr. Macdonald: I accept that the hon. Lady wants to get the best for her constituents by securing the maximum reductions possible, and she is right to do so from a constituency point of view. However, I have to try to balance the available ferry capacity with what is reasonable in terms of public expenditure, and I believe that the reduction is a balanced one, costing £100,000 extra to CalMac.

Land Reform

10. **Mrs. Eleanor Laing** (Epping Forest): What responses he has received on his consultation on land reform. [65836]

12. **Mr. Tim Boswell** (Daventry): If he will make a statement about the economic impact of his proposals for land reform in Scotland. [65838]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Donald Dewar): We received more than 1,200 responses to our consultation papers on land reform. Our proposals are genuinely radical and have been widely welcomed. I am glad that they are attracting the attention of so many Conservative Members.

Mrs. Laing: I agree that the Secretary of State's proposals are, if nothing else, radical, but does he not agree that, in practice, those who look after the land in Scotland are farmers? Would it not have been more relevant to events in Scotland if the Secretary of State had made plans to spend taxpayers' money helping farmers in their present crisis instead of wasting enormous sums on his radical but old-fashioned policies on land reform?

Mr. Dewar: May I say to the hon. Lady in a friendly spirit that I would welcome her coming back to her homeland, going perhaps a little wider than Kilmacolm, where she was born, and talking to the National Farmers Union of Scotland about the substantial package of aid twice put together in the past year to help, in particular, those in less favoured areas of agriculture, such as beef and sheep? A great deal of money has gone into that.

We are now putting forward a radical proposal that would allow communities who have lived on the land and invested their life's work in the land to have a say. They would be able to buy the land if it were on the market and would get the advice, support and encouragement that would allow them do that if they so wished. That is not an easy option and people must be in a position to take advantage of that chance—they must have skills, know-how and staying power. Throughout Scotland, there is popular support for our attempts to deal with the land question and give those small communities, who often live in fragile parts of the country, the right to have a say, so that they do not wake up one morning and find that the land on which they live has been sold from under their feet without their knowledge.

Mr. Boswell: Will the Secretary of State heed the danger that the threat of a compulsory purchase order may reduce the collateral available to landowners on which they could raise loans to develop their properties and business? Will he also have regard to the interim report of the working party to the Deputy Prime Minister, which sets out the entirely sensible, fundamental principle that

one precondition of compulsory purchase should be that the public interest clearly outweighs the rights of the individual citizen?

Mr. Dewar: I recognise that there are good landowners and that many struggle, often in difficult circumstances, to maintain their holdings and work them effectively. The hon. Gentleman has obviously given the matter much thought, so I am sure he will recognise that there has been a great deal of support for our proposals, from institutions as well as individuals, some of whom represent large bodies of landowning opinion. I have been very impressed by the constructive way in which many of those organisations have approached the matter.

I do not want to embarrass a noble Lord, but I cannot help reflecting on the words of the Duke of Buccleuch, who said of the reform:

"If this had been going through the House of Lords, I would have voted for it."

I should say, in fairness, that he went on to criticise aspects of the reform.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

The Minister of State was asked—

Judges (Declaration of Interests)

28. **Mr. Gordon Prentice** (Pendle): What steps he is taking to ensure that judges declare any relevant interests before hearing a case. [65855]

The Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): There already exists a requirement that any individual judge who recognises a potential conflict of interest should inform the parties concerned. In addition, my right hon. and noble Friend the Lord Chancellor wrote to the senior Law Lord on 16 December last year asking that the Law Lords should, before hearing an appeal, consider together whether any of their number might appear to be subject to a conflict of interest and, in order to ensure their impartiality and the appearance of impartiality of the Committee, require any Law Lord to disclose any such circumstances to the parties and not sit if any party objects and the Committee so determines.

Mr. Prentice: That is a very good answer, but does not my hon. Friend share my incredulity that when the Lord Chancellor and the Lord Chief Justice wrote to members of the judiciary asking them voluntarily to disclose whether they were members of the freemasons, 64 members of the judiciary stayed silent? In the light of that statistic, is there not a compelling case for introducing a statutory register of interests, such as that which applies in the House, to make sure that when judges hear cases, they show their hand first?

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's compliment—if that is what it was. Clearly, the Government are anxious to learn all the lessons from the Pinochet case, and will continue to monitor the situation. However, we have no plans at present to introduce a comprehensive register of interests for the judiciary.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): The hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) could have found the same response in a written answer that appeared today at column *50* of *Hansard.*

I remind the Minister that the Lord Chancellor, his boss, is the head of the judiciary. Under the Access to Justice Bill *[Lords]*, he has taken on 17 new powers or interests. Will the Minister justify three of them?

Mr. Hoon: The hon. and learned Gentleman knows full well that, once the Access to Justice Bill *[Lords]* has made its way through the other place, he will have every opportunity to raise such questions on the Floor of this House. I am sure that we can discuss them at the appropriate time.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): Will my hon. Friend say whether coroners are required to complete the masonic disclosure forms? If so, have they all completed the forms? If not all have done so, will he publish a list of those who have not?

Mr. Hoon: I am not aware that they are so required.

Community Legal Advice Services

29. **Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough): In what ways he monitors the adequacy and quality of community legal advice services; and what further action he plans to ensure excellence in such services. [65856]

The Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): The majority of advice services are currently provided outside the existing legal aid scheme. The Legal Aid Board subjects franchised legal and advice service providers to a continuous monitoring process and receives advice from the 13 regional legal services committees on local need for legal services. As part of the developing community legal service, we are establishing a quality task force to develop a kitemark system for high quality community legal services.

Fiona Mactaggart: Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the provision of immigration advice in some parts of the country is still inadequate to meet the needs of the community, and that there are too few franchised lawyers offering immigration advice? What steps are being taken to increase the accessibility of excellent immigration advice where it is needed throughout the country?

Mr. Hoon: I do share my hon. Friend's concern. The Government attach great importance to the availability of competent advice on immigration matters. Poor quality advice can be very damaging, both to the client and to the wider community. As a result, the Government have asked the Legal Aid Board to submit detailed proposals to tackle the shortfall of quality advice providers. The extension of

the deadline for solicitors to apply for a legal aid franchise will also give practitioners wishing to apply for an immigration franchise further opportunities to do so.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): First, may I offer my genuine and heartfelt commiserations to the Minister whose boss once again appears to have vetoed his long-delayed and well-deserved prospects of promotion?

On the subject of the need for community legal advice centres, does he accept that the overlap between such centres and citizens advice bureaux causes great difficulty? Will he examine that problem carefully, as citizens advice bureaux staff are often asked for advice on complex legal questions for which they are not qualified? Sometimes CAB staff find it difficult to know where best to send people with legal problems so that they can receive comprehensive advice from qualified persons.

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's observations, not least because of the sheer pleasure that trying to answer his questions on a Tuesday afternoon each month always gives me. The Government are aware of the potential difficulties caused by conflicting sources of advice. That is why we have established five pioneer areas under the community legal service scheme, specifically to determine how best we can reconcile the needs for first-tier advice of a more general nature with the provision of the more specialised legal advice that is sometimes required.

Court Service (Exeter)

30. **Mr. Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter): What progress has been made on securing funding for the proposed new accommodation for the court service in Exeter. [65857]

The Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): The Government have accepted my hon. Friend's representations about Exeter requiring new courtroom accommodation. It will be acquired through a private-public partnership, and we expect bids to be invited by July.

Mr. Bradshaw: I am extremely pleased by that reply and grateful to my hon. Friend. There has been much local concern about delay in the realisation of the scheme, so can my hon. Friend go a little further by publishing a formal timetable for the advertisement and for the start of work? Might he also re-examine the reasons given for the magistrates court decision not to relocate into the new complex, as many people—including me—believe that those reasons are fallacious?

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend has argued assiduously, effectively and consistently for a new Crown court in Exeter. Now that the Government have accepted his case, it is important to make progress with all possible speed. However, accommodation for the magistrates court is a matter for the local magistrates court committee.

Legal Services (Public Access)

32. **Ms Sally Keeble** (Northampton, North): What regional consultations he has undertaken in respect of improved public access to legal services. [65860]

The Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): The Government will take account of a wide range of views in planning and funding legal services through the community legal service. The 13 regional legal services committees established by the Legal Aid Board as part of our programme of legal aid reform include members drawn from all sectors of their local communities. The RLSCs have undertaken regional consultations throughout England and Wales to develop regional strategies for the provision of legal services.

Ms Keeble: Is my hon. Friend aware that consultations in Northamptonshire have revealed considerable concern about access to legal services? Is he further aware of concerns among local mental health organisations, particularly the National Schizophrenia Fellowship and MIND, about the difficulties for people who have mental health problems in pressing their claims under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995? Those people cannot receive legal aid or legal help in going to employment tribunals, and they have great difficulty in representing themselves.

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. The regional legal services committees have already examined, in a general sense, the legal needs of the disabled, and the relevant voluntary groups and representatives have been included in the consultation processes. The Legal Aid Board will also be represented on the quality task force being established by the Lord Chancellor, which will address disability and equality issues.

The flexibility provided by our proposals for a community legal service will allow us to provide, for the first time, specific assistance for the legal needs of the disabled, if those needs are identified as a local priority.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Does the Minister agree that public expectation of access to legal services is rising beyond the level that the budget allocated by the Government can possibly meet? What is he doing to satisfy public expectations?

Mr. Hoon: I agree that demand for legal services is increasing. That is why the Government have set before Parliament a White Paper and a Bill on the need radically to reform the way in which legal advice is given. In particular, we must control the costs of the traditional legal aid system to make more money available, particularly for the most vulnerable in society. I look forward to receiving the hon. Lady's support for the Government's proposals.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): A key part of the Government's proposals for access to justice will be the provision of insurance against defence costs. What consultation has the Minister had with the insurance industry? Is the industry ready to underwrite cases, and what sort of costs will be involved?

Mr. Hoon: The Lord Chancellor and I have held a series of meetings with representatives of the insurance and financial services industries. We are keen that they should provide financial support, particularly to underpin the extension of conditional fee agreements, and we have every confidence that such support will be available and will continue to be available.

General Pinochet

33. **Mr. Chris Mullin** (Sunderland, South): What is the cost to date in legal fees to British public funds of the attempt to extradite General Pinochet; and if he will make a statement. [65861]

The Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): Before the case is concluded, it is difficult to give a reliable indication of costs. The costs of the Crown Prosecution Service cannot yet be separated out because CPS staff are engaged in a variety of cases at any time. However, the fees of counsel instructed by the Treasury Solicitor's Department are £105,000, of which £18,000 is recoverable under a costs order made against Senator Pinochet in the divisional court.

Mr. Mullin: Can my hon. Friend assure the House that in the unhappy event of General Pinochet's managing to escape extradition, his legal bills will be rigorously scrutinised before they are passed on to the taxpayer?

Mr. Hoon: I can certainly give my hon. Friend that assurance. Given the history of this case, the question of who should pay any costs, and in what proportion, is inevitably difficult and rather complex, especially before the case is finally resolved. The matter will ultimately be for their lordships to decide—perhaps after further legal proceedings.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): How much did Lord Hoffmann's failure to declare his interest cost public funds? The Minister will recall the fuss about the Scott inquiry in the previous Parliament. Why, in this Parliament, must the President of the Board of Trade resign because he failed to declare an interest, while a judge such as Lord Hoffmann, who had a direct personal interest in the case, gets off literally scot free?

Mr. Hoon: The question of who should pay those costs and those parts of the costs will be a matter for their lordships to determine at the conclusion of the case. I am not able to assist the hon. Gentleman further on that point at this stage.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Is my hon. Friend aware that, whatever public money is spent, it will be well justified in trying to bring a former criminal dictator to justice—

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Member knows the sub judice rule in the House. That question was quite unnecessary. I had hoped that it would be rather more positive, and deal with legal fees, as the original question demands.

Sex Offenders

3.31 pm

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere) (*by private notice*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department whether any prisoners currently serving sentences as a result of convictions to which part I of the Sex Offenders Act 1997 applies will be released under home detention curfew on 28 January, and if he will make a statement.

The Minister of State, Home Department (Mr. Paul Boateng): I do not expect any sex offender to be curfewed on home detention curfew on Thursday. Governors have been instructed that no sex offender should be considered for home detention curfew unless there are exceptional circumstances, and then only if there is the clearest evidence of no risk to the public. In any case, any proposal to curfew such an offender will have to be approved by the Director General of the Prison Service.

As members of the Home Affairs Select Committee unanimously recognised recently, home detention curfew will improve the transition of short-term offenders from custody back into the community, by providing order into often chaotic life styles. It will encourage offenders to take greater responsibility for finding a stable address. Prison governors have already reported a much greater willingness by prisoners to make suitable release arrangements. Prisoners discharged to a stable address, and curfewed to that address for at least nine hours a day, are much less likely to reoffend. The scheme is first and foremost about protecting the public.

I shall set out the conditions under which an offender may be placed on home detention curfew, which the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) will want to hear. First, only offenders serving between three months and four years will be eligible. Secondly, only prisoners who do not pose a risk to the public, do not pose a risk of reoffending, are likely to abide by the curfew conditions and who have a suitable home address will be allowed on home detention curfew. Prisoners who fail any of those tests will complete their sentence in prison. On Thursday, I expect no more than about 50 prisoners to be curfewed. None of those will be offenders under part I of the Sex Offenders Act 1997.

Mr. Clappison: Is the Minster aware of the depth of public concern about sex offenders and the public's desire for the strongest possible protection from the risk that such offenders pose? Is he aware that Opposition Members have all along expressed concern about sex offenders with regard to the Government's programme of early release from prison facilitated by electronic tagging? In view of the grave risk involved in such cases, should not the Government be in possession of relevant information and have a grasp of what is going on?

According to written answers provided last night, the Government were able to say only that, out of the 135 prisoners eligible to be considered for release, fewer than 10 were sex offenders. They could not give the exact figure. When it came to the number of prisoners actually to be released, we were told that the information would be available only after 28 January.

At the start of his statement, however, the Minister told us that he "expects" no sex offenders to be released, but, at the end of it, he told us that no such prisoners will be released. What is the case? Does the Minister know whether any of those prisoners will be released? If the answer is that no such prisoners will be released, why could not the Government give that information yesterday evening? Why are the Government suddenly able to produce that figure today, when they were unable to produce it yesterday, after months and months of preparation for the scheme, which was first announced by the Government as long ago as November 1997? Does not that show a Government who, at the very least, are slipshod when it comes to obtaining and imparting vital information on an important subject?

For the future, will the Minister tell us now approximately how many sex offenders will be eligible for release when the scheme is up and running, given that more than 7,000 prisoners in the prison population are eligible for release, and 4,000 will be on early release as a result of tagging at any one time? The Minister looks perplexed. I hope that those facts do not come as a surprise to him, because they are contained in answers that his Department has given. He should know that information. Will he tell us now how many of those offenders might be sex offenders? Will he give us an assurance now that, when Ministers actually find out how many sex offenders will be released and discover what is going on, they will give the House that information in good time? Will they ensure that they obtain that information?

Finally, will the Minister give us a definite assurance today that no sex offenders will be released on Thursday of this week? Is the answer to that yes?

Mr. Boateng: I am looking perplexed only at the hon. Gentleman's apparent lack of ability to listen to what I have said. No sex offenders under part I of the Sex Offenders Act 1997 will be released on Thursday—none, not any. I hope that the hon. Gentleman has heard me and understands me.

The hon. Gentleman must also understand the difference between eligibility for consideration under the 1997 Act and the circumstances in which someone would be adjudged to be of a degree of risk such that it would be safe to enable him to leave under the conditions of the home curfew. The point of the home detention curfew is to ensure that the public interest is protected. It will be protected, it has been protected, and we shall monitor the release of all prisoners under the home detention curfew in a way that will ensure that the purposes of the home detention curfew are met.

Before the hon. Gentleman starts playing party politics with the home detention curfew, he needs to understand that each and every member of the all-party Home Affairs Select Committee—including the hon. Members for Woking (Mr. Malins), for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) and for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth)—supports home detention curfews. The aim of those curfews is to protect the public, and we shall ensure that the public are protected.

Military Action Against Iraq (Parliamentary Approval)

3.38 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the prior approval, by a simple majority of the House of Commons, of military action by United Kingdom forces against Iraq.

Let me be brutally candid. I do not think that the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Defence Secretary—along, it had better be said, with most Members of the House of Commons, and the President of the United States and Mrs. Albright—have any real notion of the horror that is being unleashed against the people of Iraq.

The trite phrase,

"We have no quarrel with the people of Iraq"

is cant. Sanctions and bombing are actions that harm no one but the Iraqi people. If the Prime Minister had understood the high-tech savagery of that to which he was giving his agreement, he would never have allowed himself to step out of No. 10 Downing street in front of a Christmas tree to announce military strikes, and he certainly would not have chosen to be photographed, as he was, in the cockpit of a Tornado aircraft in Kuwait.

My right hon. Friend sitting next to me, the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), has served in war, as has the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath). Some other hon. Members have experienced the V1s and V2s attacking London. I have experience only of firing guns on ranges in Lulworth and Höhne-Belsen in Rhine Army, but the smell of cordite and the din were enough to give an inkling of the awfulness of bombardment.

Those colleagues who for age reasons have never served in the forces, and who have been inoculated against weapons of mass destruction by watching Indiana Jones and the like on television—I make no criticism of that—may have little real grasp of the enormities that are currently being perpetrated in our name.

We all gape at the fireworks over Baghdad from the comfort of our living rooms. When, with my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Kelvin (Mr. Galloway), I saw the end result of laser-guided bombs, as I did at the Amariya—the shelter—in Baghdad in 1994—the carbonated torsos of women and sheltering children imprinted on the walls—it had the same sort of effect as when I saw the holocaust museum in Jerusalem.

It is not simply a matter of actual death and destruction. Imagine having young children in a city of 4.5 million, screaming every night, traumatised at the deafening sounds all around them. We must imagine terrified old people, bewildered by the west using high-tech to frighten them out of their wits.

The Prime Minister, quite honourably, sets out his stall as a Christian socialist. He will therefore know his Augustine and his Aquinas. Did they not have a good deal to say about everything possible being done to avoid war, as a condition of a just war? By no stretch of the imagination has that been done. There has been no light at the end of the tunnel on sanctions. It is not only my sponsors and I who think so.

For example, Archbishop Edwin O'Brien, the archbishop of the archdiocese for United States military services, has said that the US bombing of Iraq is morally questionable, and that US military personnel should question their actions if ordered to take an action that is a clear

"violation of the moral law."

Archbishop O'Brien said in a statement to the Catholic chaplains serving the US armed forces around the world that soldiers, airmen, seamen and marines

"are not exempt from making conscientious decisions"

when confronted with immoral orders. He continued:

"I join the bishops of our country as well as the concerned voices of the Holy See and other hierarchies in calling on our president and his advisers to initiate no further military action in the Middle East."

The archbishop praised the professionalism of the US military and noted that they are subject to the policy decisions of US elected leaders. He stated:

"Once civilian leadership decides a policy requiring military action, it is the sworn obligation of all in our armed forces to execute their mission in complete obedience unless in a specific instance the required action is judged clearly illegal or immoral."

I am not criticising the armed forces of Britain or the United States, but Archbishop O'Brien stipulated the conditions under which a soldier decides the morality of an order. He asserted:

"In executing orders that might violate just war requirements military personnel face a serious moral challenge. . . Any individual who judges an action on his . . . part to be in violation of the moral law is bound to avoid that action."

He went on to state:

"When clear moral conclusions that a particular act is unjust cannot be reached because, for example, of lack of sufficient evidence, the individual is justified in following the presumably better informed decision of his or her superiors."

We must take that into account.

If I make my argument personal to the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary or the Defence Secretary, it is because members of the Cabinet are letting it be known that even they were not consulted about the current bombing, or the moral issues involved. Britain is, after all, supposedly a parliamentary democracy, not a presidential state.

The real object of the Bill is to try to bring home to each Member of Parliament, by vote, and each member of the Government exactly what he or she is supporting, and the moral dilemmas, such as those outlined by Archbishop O'Brien, that they face—death of civilians; inevitable collateral damage; making Saddam Hussein into a latter-day Saladin, even more popular with the Arab masses, if not with the Al-Sabah family in Kuwait, than was President Nasser in his heyday; and making little dent on mobile weapons which, if they exist, were certainly not found by UNSCOM.

Let us not pretend that this is a clear legislative proposal, in its final form. I make no such claim. There may be occasions on which the secrecy of an SAS strike is justified. It could, for instance, be an operation to rescue British nationals: in such cases, surprise is of the essence. There could be other occasions on which a response might be called for—a response to a perceived or actual scud missile attack.

No; what the Bill is about is the simple proposition that, in circumstances in which Britain is embarking on a protracted military operation with no clear end in sight, Parliament must be formally consulted and a decision must be made by majority vote, before our country drifts

into a conflict whose consequences and objectives are far from clear. Incidentally, there is also a real risk that such a conflict could undermine the United Nations. It is no good talking about the authority of the United Nations when three out of its five permanent members—Russia, China and France—are against the proposals. There are also real questions to be asked when UNSCOM, which I visited seven weeks ago in Baghdad, turns out to be a nest of spies.

Before we got deeper and deeper into what could so easily turn out to be a Vietnam-like conflict with Iraq, the pros and cons should have been hammered out on the anvil of parliamentary argument. Had that been allowed to happen, this question would have been asked to the point of tedious repetition: "What do we do after we have bombed and bombed and bombed?" If the phrase "keeping Saddam in his cage" has any meaning at all, it surely means "conducting a state of war for the foreseeable future".

As hon. Members who were here in the 1980s may recollect, I was no admirer of Mrs. Thatcher, but give her due: she at least agreed to, and possibly initiated, the recall of Parliament on 3 April 1982 to secure the imprimatur of the House before sending the fleet to the Falklands. In the case of Iraq—although it is arguable what the House agreed to in February 1998—that has not happened, at any rate not recently.

Hon. Members on both sides of the House who might take a diametrically opposite view from that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield, the Bill's sponsors and other Labour Members on the substance of the Iraq issue could feel perfectly comfortable about voting for at least allowing discussion of a Bill that is about clarity of thinking on military objectives, and about the proposition that before men and women are asked to risk their lives there ought to be a decision by vote in a democratically elected Parliament.

Finally, and ironically, there is a reason why the Bill should commend itself to the Prime Minister: it gives him time—a breathing space—in his dealings with the President of the United States. If the President says, "Prime Minister, will you support a decision in favour of sustained bombing?", it is surely much better—

Madam Speaker: Order. Time is up.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Tam Dalyell, Mr. Tony Benn, Mr. Harry Cohen, Mr. Jeremy Corbyn, Mr. George Galloway, Mr. Neil Gerrard, Dr. Ian Gibson, Mr. John McAllion, Mrs. Alice Mahon, Mr. Robert Marshall-Andrews, Mr. Dennis Skinner and Audrey Wise.

Military Action Against Iraq (Parliamentary Approval)

Mr. Tam Dalyell accordingly presented a Bill to require the prior approval, by a simple majority of the House of Commons, of military action by United Kingdom forces against Iraq: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 16 April, and to be printed [Bill 35].

Point of Order

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I seek your guidance on today's debate on the working families tax credit and the Tax Credits Bill. The debate should be adjourned almost immediately for the following reasons. First, notwithstanding Government assurances, there is no reference in the Bill to the child care tax credit which forms a critical and crucial part of the measure. What is most intriguing is that at the time of the 1998 Budget, the Chancellor said:

"We will introduce a new child care tax credit as part of the working families tax credit."—[*Official Report*, 17 March 1998; Vol.308, c. 1106.]

The Paymaster General, who will advance the course of the Bill, said on the "Today" programme this morning:

"The really important element for women is the presence of the child care tax credits."

However, there is no reference to child care tax credits in the Bill. The public are, therefore, being misled. Unless child care tax credits are included in the Bill, the cornerstone of the measure cannot stand and there is no purpose in debating it until it is included. The Government have made no attempt to explain why the child care credits have not been included.

Secondly, the Government also promised an impact assessment. Page 18 of the explanatory notes states:

"A regulatory impact assessment will be published . . . in time for the detailed debates on the primary legislation."

No such statement has been published and that makes the debate of the Bill a pointless exercise. A statement about the huge costs that businesses are likely to incur has not been published so that businesses can take a view on the matter.

The third reason is a supporting point. The Bill has been framed with massive Henry VIII clauses, of which clause 10 is a classic example. Little in the Bill is provided in the detail necessary for the public, through Members of Parliament, to scrutinise the measure and decide whether it is a serious proposal, or merely a Government exercise in dogma.

Madam Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me some notice of his point of order. The circumstances of a Bill's introduction and its contents are exactly what a Second Reading debate is all about. The hon. Gentleman should seek answers to his questions in the debate that will follow. In fact, he must argue his case for the Bill's rejection through debate.

Furthermore, it might assist him if I tell the hon. Gentleman and the House that I have selected the reasoned amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition. In doing that, the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues will be able to vote for that amendment and against the Government's Bill, to try to reject it. He must raise his points through debate with the Ministers who will be handling the Bill.

Orders of the Day

Tax Credits Bill

[Relevant documents: The First Report from the Social Security Committee, Tax and Benefits: Implementation of Tax Credits (HC 29) and the Government Response contained in the Second Special Report from the Social Security Committee (HC 176) .]

Order for Second Reading read.

Madam Speaker: I inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

3.53 pm

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am delighted to be opening the debate on the Second Reading of the Tax Credits Bill. Families are the bedrock of a stable and healthy society, and in a fast-changing economy—with its uncertainties and vulnerabilities—families, now more than ever, need security of support when bringing up children.

The Government are determined to support families by making sure that work pays and by helping people to move from welfare into work. The working families tax credit and the disabled persons tax credit are central elements of our strategy. It is shameful and a condemnation of the major opposition parties that they are not prepared to be on the side of working families, and that their amendments would prevent the assistance that the Bill will provide. Despite all that they say about supporting families, they really want to maintain a system that could be improved only by the introduction of the working families tax credit, which would especially help those who are in work, but on low incomes.

The working families tax credit will provide £4.5 billion a year and support 1.3 million working families. That is a contribution of £17 a week more in the system and it will help families. The hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) should explain why the previous Conservative Government agreed with support for child care and for families. They apparently agreed with ensuring that the poverty trap was eased and that people should be helped into work. It is just that the mechanisms that the previous Government put in place did not deal with that problem. When the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green rises to the Dispatch Box, perhaps he could answer that question.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): Will the hon. Lady, who has to give the explanations, please explain to the House and to the public why, this morning, she indicated that the child care tax credit section was in the Bill, when it is not? Why is it not in the Bill as it is such a cornerstone of the whole policy.

Dawn Primarolo: The Bill provides for the transfer to the Inland Revenue of the family credit unit and, as the hon. Gentleman has rightly pointed out, for the development and explanation of those measures through regulations. As he knows full well—because, presumably, he has read, for example, the House of Commons briefing on the matter—both the assessment of the impact on business, which is to be available for the Committee, and the details of the Bill, which are to be available for the Committee, will enable the detailed discussion that he claims that he requires.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dawn Primarolo: Hang on a minute.

In opening the debate, I am laying out the major points that will be covered in the Bill, which the Committee will be able to scrutinise. If the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green wanted to pursue that, he could have chosen to speak first from the Dispatch Box today, but he chose not to. I would certainly welcome him on the Committee that considers the Bill in order to pursue those matters.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dawn Primarolo: No, I want to make some progress. I have answered the hon. Gentleman's points. He just does not like the answer and the fact that there are responses to the details that he seeks. He is trying to conceal the fact that his party has said that it wants to repeal—if it were fortunate enough to be elected again—the working families tax credit and to take away from working families all the benefits that the Bill provides for. I am not surprised that he is embarrassed, and that he wants to take the debate in another direction and shout at me from a sedentary position.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Will the Minister simply answer the question that she was asked? Nothing in the Bill refers to the child care tax credit. Why is that the case? Why have the Government left it out and how will they bring it in?

Dawn Primarolo: The child care tax credit has not been left out. The Bill gives us powers to introduce it. We are discussing the powers that are being transferred to the Inland Revenue to deliver the tax credit; the regulations provide for that. It has been made clear that the details will be available for the House, including the impact assessment, which has been conducted very thoroughly with business, with which we have co-operated over the past year.

The reason why the Opposition want to pursue that line of argument is because they do not want me to lay out the details. I will make some progress in the hope that I make it clear to Opposition Members exactly what is being proposed in the Bill.

The Bill is targeted at families with children, on low to moderate earnings, for whom the unemployment and poverty traps are particularly severe. It will help to encourage people to move from welfare into work by improving incentives. It will give families with children a guaranteed minimum income of £10,000 a year—£190 a week. That is the message that Opposition Members want to prevent being delivered in the House.

The Bill will remove the obstacle of the lack of affordable child care that affects so many families. As the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green said, in transferring the family credit unit to the Inland Revenue, what is important is that the Revenue is given the powers

to remove that obstacle, which is what the Bill provides for. It will also enable those who are disabled to make the transition from welfare into work more easily, and provide a guaranteed minimum income for those who do so.

The working families tax credit is complemented by other key Government policies that will make work pay and help people move from welfare into work. The national minimum wage—

Mr. Bercow: Will the Minister give way?

Dawn Primarolo: No, I want to make some progress. I know that just mentioning the national minimum wage forces the hon. Gentleman to his feet, but I have been asked to explain how the system will work and I am about to do so.

The national minimum wage will ensure greater decency and fairness in the workplace by removing the worst excesses of low pay. From 1 April, all adult workers will earn at least £3.60 an hour, benefiting another 2 million workers, two thirds of them women. Opposition Members oppose that policy. They do not want to help the poor earn more despite the fact that last week they were claiming to be the champions of the poor.

We are increasing child benefit by £2.50 a week from April, in addition to the normal uprating for inflation. When the Conservatives were in government, they did not do that. They did not invest in children or address those issues. At £130 extra a year, it is the biggest ever increase in child benefit.

We are also reforming national insurance to remove the barriers to work for the lower paid. From April, we will cut the burden on all employees—a gain of more than £65 a year. We shall introduce a 10p starting rate of income tax when it is economically right to do so.

There is an increasing polarisation between working and non-working families. The proportion of households with at least one adult of working age out of work has doubled since 1979 when the Conservatives were elected. Those in workless households account for a growing proportion of those living in poverty.

The youngest in our society have often suffered most. A third of all children in Britain live in poverty and half of those live in households with no one in work. That is the Conservative legacy. They failed to address the issue and now try to stop us dealing with it.

The Government believe that the best way to tackle poverty is to help people into jobs. That is good for people and for the economy. Everyone in Britain has talents and potential, and we can all benefit from people being able to use their talents and fulfil their potential.

To help people into jobs, we must improve skills and employability. We must also reform the tax and benefits system that fails to reward work and does not enable people to climb the earnings ladder.

Mr. Bercow: I thank the Minister for giving way and congratulate her on her recent promotion. Why has expenditure on the working families tax credit, which will be approximately £1.5 billion a year greater than the cost of family credit, been taken out of the mainstream Department of Social Security figures and instead listed under the Government's comprehensive spending review, under the heading "Accounting and other adjustments"?

Dawn Primarolo: The Government's presentation of accounts is hotly pursued for clarity, and the way in which they account for expenditure is clearly set out in recommendations. If the hon. Gentleman looks at the requirements, he will see that the accounting for the working families tax credit follows those recommendations.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): Will the Minister give way?

Dawn Primarolo: No. The hon. Gentleman will have the opportunity to speak from the Front Bench later, when I am sure that he will make his points forcefully. I must make some progress.

The unemployment trap means that those in work can earn little more than those out of work. The system fails to recognise the costs of child care. It imposes marginal tax rates on more than 70 per cent. of 750,000 families and it puts a ceiling on the aspirations of men and women wanting to work their way up. The working families tax credit is central to overcoming those obstacles.

The working families tax credit will replace the existing family credit benefit. Under the working families tax credit, those with families who are on low incomes working at least 16 hours a week will be entitled to a basic tax credit, and an additional credit for each child. A credit will also be given for working more than 30 hours a week and, to help with child care costs, there will be a child care tax credit of up to 70 per cent. of a maximum of £105. We have increased the threshold at which the tax credit is withdrawn from £79 to £90. We have cut the taper so that the tax credit will be withdrawn more gradually, easing the transition for those moving from unemployment into work and up the earnings ladder.

The disabled persons tax credit builds on the disability working allowance in the same way as the working families tax credit builds on family credit, and contains a new child care tax credit. These are provided for within the Bill and the detail of the regulations.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): The Minister has described the new structure. Could she confirm that the 300,000 poorest recipients of family credit who get the maximum amount will not get a penny extra unless they have child care expenditure?

Dawn Primarolo: The hon. Gentleman will know that the change in the taper means that the withdrawal is more gradual, and helps more families claiming the benefit. *[Interruption.]* Madam Speaker, I am answering the question from the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb), and it is very difficult with a constant barrage from the Opposition. However, I will do my best.

Madam Speaker: I understand. I am sure that Opposition Front-Bench Members will bide their time until they get to the Dispatch Box. I look forward to hearing what they have to say.

Dawn Primarolo: As the hon. Member for Northavon will know—and as Opposition Front Benchers would know if they listened—the working families tax credit means that as people earn more, they will be able to keep more. That is the whole point of having a work incentive—to encourage people to work.

[Dawn Primarolo]

For many families—especially lone parents—the costs of child care are a major obstacle to work. In the past, that has been recognised by the Conservative party. Apparently, however, the party no longer wishes to recognise that fact. In the past, the problem of cost and access to good quality child care has denied many parents the opportunity to rejoin the work force. Not only has that had an effect on parents' confidence in their own abilities, it has denied Britain a major pool of talent and potential.

The previous Government accepted the principle of providing help with child care costs for those who go out to work. The former Secretary of State for Social Security, now the deputy leader of the Conservative party—the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley)—said in his first *Spectator* lecture on 30 March 1994 how important it was to reduce the disincentives for people to return to work and how important a child care disregard was in assisting with child care costs.

In his press release announcing the child care disregard, the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden said:

"These measures will provide a real incentive to encourage parents to return to the job market."

He also said that lone parents, in particular, would also benefit from the maintenance disregard. Unfortunately, the high hopes for that provision never materialised. Yet the Opposition are now saying that they do not support an improved scheme. Having designed a policy that failed, they are not prepared to support a policy that will succeed.

We are determined to ensure that no one is unable to take up work through lack of access to affordable, quality child care, and we are determined to help parents better balance work and family responsibilities. We are introducing a child care tax credit, combined with the national child care strategy. It is designed to make child care support more generous and transparent by providing up to 70 per cent. of the eligible child care costs, up to a maximum of £105 a week for those with two or more children. I am grateful to my hon. Friends, and especially women Members, who have emphasised strongly the importance of child care provision so that women who want to return to paid employment have that route open to them.

Mr. Pickles: I, too, congratulate the hon. Lady on her new post.

Why is it necessary for the Inland Revenue to make the payment, rather than paying it directly through the Department of Social Security?

Dawn Primarolo: That is the point of the Bill. It is an in-work incentive, designed to encourage people to return to work, to remove the stigma associated with the current system and to ensure that we can provide a tax credit. I thought that that was clear to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Do not the two most recent interventions clearly illustrate the fact that the Opposition cannot distinguish between a tax credit, investing in opportunity and work, and a social security benefit, which is about investing in the dependency culture of failure that we inherited? That is why they are in opposition and not in government.

Dawn Primarolo: Conservative Members do not like to discuss whether they failed to provide in-work incentives, the consequences of their failure to help those in paid work on very low incomes, or their failure to tackle the poverty trap or the unemployment trap. I am not surprised that they do not want to discuss the child care tax credit, because they know that it has been widely welcomed by child care groups and women's organisations. It is an example of how the Government are not only talking about helping children, but delivering help where it matters.

The working families tax credit supports families on low incomes and provides them with a real incentive to work. Working families in full-time work will have a guaranteed income of at least £190 a week, and no family with a wage packet of less than £220 a week will pay any net income tax. That is the highest effective starting point for income tax in 30 years.

The working families tax credit will cut by two thirds the number of families facing marginal tax rates of more than 70 per cent., and it will remove the last grotesque inheritance in this field from the previous Government—instances in which 100 per cent. effective tax rates were imposed on the very worst-off in our communities. The new system will encourage families to try to earn more, as they will get to keep more of what they earn. That is a crucial element in encouraging people into working.

The working families tax credit will retain an additional tax credit for people working more than 30 hours a week, which will encourage those who are employed to move from part-time to full-time work and so move up the employment ladder.

The disabled persons tax credit will help people who have an illness or a disability to find or keep a job. It is more generous than the existing disability working allowance, to ensure that people are better off moving from benefit to work.

Our aim is to create a real incentive to work, and to provide genuine encouragement to move from welfare to work. To reinforce that, we are reforming the system to provide extra help and support through the tax system. The Bill will also remove the stigma of claiming benefits.

I note, for those keen listeners of "The Archers", that the scriptwriters recently recognised the problem of stigma. Only last week, apparently, Joe Grundy did not want Clarrie, his daughter-in-law, to fill in her application form for family credit because he did not want the stigma of claiming benefits. Even the scriptwriters on that programme recognise the stigma that is attached to the present benefit, although I am not sure that Conservative Members do.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dawn Primarolo: Not at the moment.

The tax credit will be administered by the working families tax credit unit in the Inland Revenue, which has been working hard with other Government Departments and interested bodies outside, to ensure that the new system is up and running by October 1999.

From April 2000, the tax credits will be paid to employees through the pay packet or directly to the self-employed by the Inland Revenue. The tax credit is also flexible because it provides couples with a choice about who claims and receives it, which means that each family will be able to decide how the tax credit is paid to suit best their individual circumstances.

Miss Kirkbride: Will the hon. Lady explain why she believes that greater stigma is attached to claiming a benefit, which is essentially anonymous because the cheque comes through the post and no one knows about it except for an anonymous person who works for the Benefits Agency? Under her new system, employers will know the precise circumstances of their employees. Conservative Members argue that greater stigma attaches to the employer knowing the personal circumstances of the individual than the anonymous Benefits Agency. Will she respond to that point?

Dawn Primarolo: The hon. Lady knows full well the arguments about family credit and the stigma that many people attach to applying for it. She is wrong in her assertion that the employer will know all the details of an employee. That will not be the case. The employer will simply be directed to pay a specific amount to the employee. Therefore, there is no way that he or she will know the details of an individual's circumstances, or be able to find them out. Clairvoyance may be a talent of some employers, but not all. The information will not be disclosed to them.

The Conservative party has made clear its opposition to WFTC and DPTC. The shadow Secretary of State for Social Security told the House that the Conservatives would cut the working families tax credit, thereby decreasing the budget dramatically. They should explain why they are prepared to take away an extra £ 1.5 billion from the poorest working families. I think that the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) wanted me to give way to him before I sat down. Does he wish to intervene?

Mr. Pickles *indicated dissent.*

Dawn Primarolo: Earlier, the hon. Gentleman asked whether he could intervene, but he does not have to do so.

Mr. Pickles: Perhaps because of the excitement of the occasion, the hon. Lady does not realise that she has already given way to me. This morning on the "Today" programme, she was keen to say that no extra money was involved in the working families tax credit and yet it has been conclusively demonstrated that an extra £1.5 billion will be involved. Will she take this opportunity to withdraw her misleading statement on that programme?

Dawn Primarolo: My interview was not that early in the morning, so I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman was not as awake as he might have been. If he checks the record—Conservative Members seem to be informing me that they have—he will see that there is no inconsistency in what I said.

The Opposition's amendment contains some fundamental errors and misunderstandings about the Bill. They claim that it would penalise women, when it would not do so as it would give them a choice. I remind the House that 50 per cent. of family credit claimants are single families headed by women, who will still receive the payment direct. I note that the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Sir R. Smith) is laughing.

Another group of women are the primary wage earners for the family. In families where both parents are wage earners, they will be able to choose who receives the credit. The self-employed are another group who must be considered. The Opposition are trying to say that the measure will discriminate against women, or families, and that they will be worse off. That is simply not true.

The Opposition claim that there will be extra burdens, especially cash-flow problems, on business. That is also being dealt with in discussions with companies to ensure that there is no cash-flow problem and that companies are supported. Companies will be required to deduct the working families tax credit payments that they have made from the pay-as-you-earn and national insurance payments that they have collected, and pay the difference to the Inland Revenue. Where employers do not have enough money to meet the full obligation, they can apply for a grant that will be paid by the Inland Revenue to ensure that there is no loss to companies in making the payment.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): The Minister cannot deny that she is constructing an elaborate edifice of administrative change. I listened carefully to her analysis and have no difficulty with her aspirations, which are logical. Most people would agree that it is right to try to get people off benefit and into work. I want some idea of what targets the Government have set for the measure's success. Does she have any operational research that suggests how many people will be persuaded to take this route from benefit into work?

Dawn Primarolo: The Government expect that 400,000 more people will want to claim the working families tax credit in the period when we move from family credit to the fully operational new system. Take-up is clearly linked to eligibility and information. That was to have been my next point; we are talking about supporting another 400,000 families. The guaranteed minimum income for working families of £10,000 a year is crucial to that.

The case is clear. The Bill makes economic sense, provides support for families, gives families incentives to work, eases the taper in helping people move from welfare into work, gives them certainty, and provides for a child care credit. That means that we have put in place the support that is necessary for families hitherto prohibited from moving back into paid employment.

The Opposition, in their amendments, simply want to return to a system that has failed and to deny families the support that they would otherwise get. They do not acknowledge the failure of the child care credit within the family credit system, or recognise that the working families tax credit system is better and that more families will be assisted. I urge my hon. Friends to support the Government, vote for Second Reading and support us in Committee, where the full details can be clearly spelt out.

4.23 pm

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): I beg to move, To leave out from 'That' to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"this House declines to give a Second Reading to the Tax Credits Bill because it will increase the costs of social security when the Prime Minister has pledged to cut those costs; and it will increase benefit dependency, stigma, fraud and business costs, whilst undermining family structures."

There is some consensus on this matter in the Chamber. We share the Government's aspirations and want such measures to succeed, but we doubt whether the Bill will work. It proposes to remove a highly successful benefit, understood and trusted by the British people, and replace it with a tax credit that will increase dependency, stigmatise low-income families and place a heavy burden on small businesses. On the Government's own figures, the measure will add £1.5 billion on top of family credit. It breaks the Prime Minister's pledge to cut the growth in the social security budget. It is a dangerous Bill that will do great harm to the support of working families on low incomes.

Mr. Geraint Davies: May we have a clear commitment tonight that in their manifesto for the next election the Conservatives will pledge to repeal the working families tax credit? Yes or no?

Mr. Pickles: The hon. Gentleman, who I am sure is a very nice person, has been sadly let down by that appalling daily note sent out by the Labour party. It included an incomplete quote. Of course we do not want to see this measure brought in—we prefer family credit—but we recognise too that once we take control there will be people banging on the doors demanding a change from this lousy system. They will want us to address the problems.

Yvette Cooper (Pontefract and Castleford): Is the hon. Gentleman now committed to supporting the additional £1.5 billion of spending that will go into the working families tax credit, which his colleague on the Front Bench, the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), said that he wanted to cut?

Mr. Pickles: Again, the hon. Lady has been let down by her Whips. We are saying clearly that when we take control we will have to build on what the Government have done and improve on it. We have made it clear that we will pursue the matter of the extra £1.5 billion. The Government will have their way in Committee and we will have to deal with the problems that they create. Then the hon. Lady will probably be urging us to deal with the problems.

Dawn Primarolo: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way so that I can be clear about what he is saying. Is he saying that when the Government introduce these measures and they are a success, his party will not repeal them if it is ever re-elected? Is he contradicting what the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green has previously said?

Mr. Pickles: We are saying that when we return to power there will be a groundswell of opinion among the public—people receiving the tax credit and people who have to administer it. They will say, "We want this changed." We will respond because we are that kind of party. I do not know why the hon. Lady is getting so excited.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mrs. Barbara Roche): The hon. Gentleman has been extremely generous in giving way. I am anxious to follow his argument. I understand his argument thus: should his party have the great good fortune to return to power, there will be a groundswell of opinion among the British public, who will say, "We now do not want this extra £17 a week. Please take it away," and the Conservative party will do so. Is that what he is saying?

Mr. Pickles: It is acceptable for Back Benchers to be misled by the Whips, but the Minister should know better. She knows that a considerable amount of that money will be taken up by the cost of administering this very difficult and expensive system. Now, to use a time-honoured phrase, I must make some progress.

This Bill, perhaps more than any other that I have debated in the House, is dependent on secondary legislation. It is a skeletal Bill that Ministers will fill out at their leisure. We know that an entire tax credit is missing. The child care tax credit is something that the House of Commons Library describes as an integral part of the working families tax credit and the disabled persons tax credit. It is so integral that the Paymaster General spent considerable time on the "Today" programme saying how important it was. In an exclusive interview with the *Daily Mirror*, she spent a lot of time explaining how important child care credit was. Yet there are more column inches devoted to child care tax credit in her exclusive in the *Daily Mirror* than in the Bill. That is not hard, because there are no column inches devoted to child care tax credit in the Bill.

As the House tramples the boards of this Marie Céleste of a Bill, we will have to have important details filled in later. There is a frightening preponderance of Henry VIII clauses in the Bill. As the song goes, "Every one was an 'Enery". It is ironic that the Government, who boast so often that they are the great modernising Government, should now have as an unsung hero a Tudor monarch.

These concerns are shared by hon. Members on both sides of the House. In a recent report on tax and benefits, the Select Committee on Social Security expresses concern about the parliamentary scrutiny of "skeleton" Bills, saying that producing such Bills

"makes Parliamentary scrutiny at that stage very difficult. The detailed rules are contained in statutory instruments made later, although at that point there is no practical opportunity for Parliament to comment substantively, or to amend."

When we consider statutory instruments, usually in Committee, our scrutiny is carried out on the basis of "take it or leave it". We cannot amend or improve; we can only reject or approve. The Government are reluctant to withdraw measures, even when the arguments made in Committee are overwhelming. We are left a couple of weeks later with a polite note from Ministers saying that such and such a clause had an unforeseen, undesirable consequence and that they will amend it in a statutory instrument, to be tabled in due course. Such a solution is not satisfactory and makes bad use of parliamentary time.

In its report, the Social Security Committee recommended that there should be a new category of statutory instrument: a super-affirmative instrument, whose complexity and political importance warranted detailed investigation. If ever a Bill deserved to be dealt with on a super-affirmative basis, it is the one before us now. Matters as complex as the WFTC and the DPTC need full and effective scrutiny by Parliament; when the further complexity of the child care tax credit is added, that need is undeniable.

There are many questions about how the child care tax credit would work that require answers. The House needs to know whether it will penalise mothers who look after their own children, yet make it an advantage to look after other people's children. We need to know whether the House of Commons Library research paper is right to assert:

"The increased generosity of the tax will potentially create a situation in which parents will have a clear financial incentive to obtain registered child care rather than rely on informal networks, such as friends and relatives".

There are practical problems relating to who will qualify under the eligible child care criteria. There are three contradictory views. The Chancellor, in a report in the *Financial Times* last year, stated that

"the Credit would only be available for registered and highly qualified child minding and child care."

However, section 71 of the Children Act 1989 states that a person who is a parent, relative, or foster parent of a child, or who has parental responsibility for a child is ineligible to be a child minder in respect of that child for the purposes of that Act.

Finally, we have the view of the assistant director of the personal tax division of the Inland Revenue, who gave evidence to the Select Committee. In response to a question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) about whether or not a mother could register as a child minder, he said:

"There is nothing to stop anyone, if they can meet the conditions, and it is not for us to make a judgment on that, if they passed the conditions in previous years."

If that interpretation is correct, the £4 billion estimate of the cost of the child care tax credit produced by the Institute for Fiscal Studies is correct. Perhaps that is the real reason why the CCTC has been left out of the Bill.

Do the Government now intend to regulate and codify child minding? Will becoming a child minder in itself qualify a person for the working families tax credit? Those are decisions that should be taken by the House. From what we can glean from the Bill, the proposals penalise mothers who look after their own children and two-parent families. The House has a right and a duty to decide on that issue and to amend and fine-tune the Government's proposals, and not to be left with a take-it-or-leave-it dismissal.

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that he has taken small pieces of a complex piece of legislation and juxtaposed them so as to make them look like a jumble, when it is perfectly clear that the proposals will provide flexibility of choice for working mothers and enable them to obtain appropriate and high-quality child care for their children?

Mr. Pickles: The hon. Lady has missed the point. We should make decisions about that complexity. The House should have a view. Those arrangements should not be made by secondary legislation. My point is that the House will not be able to take a view because there is no mention of child care in the Bill.

Ms Keeble: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Pickles: No, I have been generous and I now want to make progress.

The Bill is vague, and not only about child care tax credit. We know that the Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation and other disability groups have expressed concern that people who receive the disabled persons tax credit will not automatically be entitled to free prescriptions, as they are with the disabled working allowance. The Minister will be aware that at a recent meeting with the Treasury and RADAR, the Government offered no guarantees about free prescriptions. Concern is also expressed about benefits currently available with DWA, including housing benefit and help from social services for children and young people in need.

Moving from family support to a tax credit is not an original idea of the new Labour Government. In the mid-1980s, the Conservative Government considered such a move and rejected it. I have no doubt that many hon. Members have a dog-eared copy of "The View from Number 11: Memoirs of a Tory Radical" by the former Chancellor, now Lord Lawson. For those who cannot abide the thought of taking that much-loved document out of the safety of their own library, his views on tax credits are reproduced in the House of Commons research paper 99/3.

The former Chancellor said that there was an overwhelming practical case for keeping the two systems apart. He argued that they are different in that one considers an individual's income and the other considers the income and capital of the individual and the family. I am sure that that is why he withdrew the proposals, but there may have been other reasons.

There was a great deal of opposition from another place and, more importantly, a near revolt by the national women's organisations in the Conservative party. At that time, I was a member of the national executive committee of the National Union of Conservative Associations. I have a vivid recollection of the heated debates on those proposals. The Conservative women's organisations made a positive case for continuing to ensure that income to support the family was paid to the wife, in much the same way as child benefit is paid to the mother. That is a classic case of the argument between the wallet and the purse.

Those arguments were eloquently put by the hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck), who said that in

"most households, sole responsibility for meeting children's needs is the women's domain; women are more likely than men to spend the income they receive directly on the family; and income in some households is unequally distributed which disadvantages women."

I have no idea whether the hon. Lady was, in a past life, a member of the Conservative women's organisation, but she describes the dilemma of the transfer of money from the purse to the wallet.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): When considering these proposals, it is important to remember that we are discussing not only replacing family credit with a working

[Mr. Peter L. Pike]

family tax credit, which I am sure will be better for the low-paid people in a constituency such as mine, but an accompanying, important proposal to provide an increase in child benefit of £2.50—well above inflation—which will be paid directly to the mother. My hon. Friend the Paymaster General referred to that in her opening speech.

Mr. Pickles: The hon. Gentleman has been misled by the Minister, because the proposals go much further and will mean that families earning as much as £38,000 will benefit.

Mr. Chris Pond (Gravesham): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that a family earning £38,000 would need to have five children to qualify? Will he tell the House how many people would fit into that category?

Mr. Pickles: The hon. Gentleman's argument is inconsistent with that of his colleagues on the Front Bench, who have been bellowing, from a sedentary position, "So are you against that, then?"

The Henry VIII clauses might be better described as "The Archers" clauses—or, more specifically, the Clarrie Grundy clauses. The Paymaster General referred in passing to "The Archers", but I think that she entirely misunderstood the Grundy family's problems. As regular listeners to Radio 4's serial about the everyday life of country folk know, the Grundys have fallen on hard times. The money-making schemes of husband Eddie and father-in-law Joe have come to nought: to get extra income, wife Clarrie has applied for family credit by obtaining a form from the local post office.

Under the Government's proposals, the money will not automatically be put into Clarrie's hands: it could arrive in her pay packet, or by way of her husband's. The latter possibility illustrates the problem described by the hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North. Hon. Members will recall that, in recent episodes, Clarrie has been cheated out of a world cup ticket, council tax money has been misappropriated to meet the family's tax bill, and part of the £25 owed to Caroline Bone over a cushion cover has been used to buy two meat pies.

Jacqui Smith (Redditch): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Pickles: No, I have been far too generous already.

I am confident that, if Clarrie gets family credit, she will use the benefit money for her boys. If Eddie or Joe gets hold of the money, I am equally confident that they will either spend it on madcap schemes or behind the bar of The Bull.

However, not all households are composed of lovable rogues. The Government must recognise that the more they use working families tax credit to shift income from the purse to the wallet, the smaller will be the amount spent on children.

Ms Keeble: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Pickles: I have been more than generous and have given way more than the Paymaster General did. I intend to make some progress, but if the hon. Lady is patient, I may give way to her later.

The Select Committee proposes that the default payment be made to the mother. The Government, I understand, are less enthusiastic.

Mr. Alan Johnson (Hull, West and Hessle): Is that the end of "The Archers"?

Mr. Pickles: The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that I shall return to "The Archers" in due course. The programme is a very good plough to push: I shall come back to it again and again.

As I said, the Select Committee wants the default payment to be made directly to the mother. The Government are less enthusiastic, but are in favour of a choice on the form. We want that choice to be included clearly in the Bill.

One question must be resolved. If there is a conflict in the household, who will receive the payment? Should it go into the purse or into the wallet? Who will decide? Will the first result of the Government's much vaunted family policy be that it sets husband against wife?

Family credit is a remarkably successful benefit. It has a take-up rate of 72 per cent., and that rate rises to 85 per cent. when calculated by expenditure. No other benefit is so successful. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, there is virtually no stigma attached to claiming family credit. The foundation is hardly a right-wing organisation, but it has stated that family credit "is often seen as a form of supplementary child benefit."

By contrast, the Institute for Fiscal Studies—which has no axe to grind—has observed:

"As employers and the potential work colleagues would observe the WFTC, it might increase the stigma associated with receiving transfer payments and so decrease take-up."

Discouraging families from taking up the benefit is surely not what the Government intend.

Let us return to "The Archers". We have examined the case for having the money go to Eddie Grundy, but let us suppose that it went to Clarrie's pay packet at Bridge farm. That might of course put strain on Pat Archer, but Pat is a benign employer. If, however, the employer was Brian Aldridge, the cold-hearted capitalist, he would be able to know at a glance exactly what Clarrie's income was, and to adjust her salary to take into consideration the money she would get from working families tax credit.

Jacqui Smith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way to me, because I claimed in my maiden speech to be the Member for Ambridge. Does he accept that when the Government are successful in bringing in the working families tax credit, the Grundys will be better off on average by £17 a week? In addition, as he has said, Clarrie will have the option of receiving the credit herself because she works, meaning that the Grundys are a pair of workers, the group who, as my hon. Friend the Paymaster General said, represent a significant proportion of people on family credit.

However, in addition to all that, does the hon. Gentleman accept that for the first time Clarrie will be able to receive support for child care for her two boys? Will the hon. Gentleman tell the Grundys and other such families that the Conservative party would not support that change, and that he would repeal that type of support?

Mr. Pickles: I was beginning to think of asking the hon. Lady to give way to me. I have a feeling that the

hon. Lady, who claims to be the Member for Ambridge, will not believe what I say, and has no confidence in me. Let me give her the views of someone to whom she would listen: the President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons, the right hon. Member for Derby, South (Mrs. Beckett), warned a Standing Committee on 18 March 1986—

Jacqui Smith: In 1986?

Mr. Pickles: The hon. Lady must pay attention to the good advice of her right hon. Friend. The Leader of the House then said:

"Unfortunately, there are instances in which employers deliberately manipulate the system and withhold benefits to which employees are entitled . . . For the Government to propose putting the weight of payments that are an important part of family income on to a system which gives employers that freedom it is a substantial risk."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee B*, 18 March 1986; c. 943.]

I agree with that.

Lorna Fitzsimons (Rochdale): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Pickles: No, I am afraid the hon. Lady has not caught my eye.

Businesses will intrude into personal and family financial circumstances, to the detriment of privacy. The change will also place on business the heavy financial burden of administering the system. Large firms may have a payroll and personnel section, but the majority of people are employed by small firms that do not have such a facility. The owners of small firms will have to fill in the paperwork on the kitchen table after a hard day's work.

The Institute of Directors has commented that that

"could discourage companies from taking on low skilled or semiskilled employees."

When, in 1986, the current President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons considered the problems of using employers to deliver family credit through the wage packet, she said:

"It will be impossible for the DHSS to make the scheme work without the co-operation of employers and if employers, both large and small, are expressing their considerable anxiety, the Department will be running its neck into a noose."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee B*, 18 March 1986; c. 942.]

New Government, new neck, new Labour, same noose.

We must remember that the credit was not originally intended to be delivered in the way that is now intended. As recently as 16 June 1998, Mr. Martin Taylor, the author of many of the Government's proposals, told the Select Committee on the Treasury:

"I think that it would be better from the employers' point of view that the thing should run through the tax code which would allow the present cumulative principle to apply."

The Select Committee heard that officials had devised an N code to run a series of examples in which every case created distortion after some time.

So business must pick up the Government's ambition. The result: a heavy burden of administration and a reduction in job opportunities. For all the Government's intentions to the contrary, if a small firm is faced with two applicants, one in receipt of WFTC and one not, it will plump for the one who is free from burden. How sadly ironic it is that the very measure meant to get people out of dependency will push them further into it.

Lorna Fitzsimons: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Pickles: No.

Experience from abroad shows that a system on which the working families tax credit is based has been more open to widespread abuse and has produced an increase in fraud. Canada introduced a similar scheme a few years ago, but is moving back to a benefits-based system. WFTC will offer huge bonuses for dishonesty and has the potential to pull employees into a web of dishonesty and corruption.

It seems that the lessons of Canada have not been learnt. In fact, they have not even been considered. We know that, because the Government's expert, Mr. Martin Taylor, told us so. In evidence to the Select Committee, Mr. Taylor said:

"Canada is one of the few countries whose system I have not studied carefully".

In the United States of America, a similar tax credit, the earned income tax credit, was introduced, with the result that the Internal Revenue Service received claims of $4.4 billion more than the refunds that people were entitled to receive. To paraphrase the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), the working families tax credit is fraught with great dangers. It offers high bonuses for dishonesty, strengthens the employer's hold over people, pulls employers into a web of corruption and rewards employers paying low wages. I see that the right hon. Gentleman is in his place. I shall not develop his case further because he may want to catch your eye during the debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

It is worth looking at how social security and housing benefit fraud occurs. I had an opportunity a few weeks ago to talk to social security and housing benefit fraud investigation officers. I asked them about the kind of person who commits fraud. It was their view that there were people who went about defrauding the system cleverly and maliciously. It was their experience that some people would create separate identities and make multiple claims. But it was also their view that the vast majority of people simply drifted into fraud because the system allowed them to do so. They then found it impossible to crawl their way out, and ended up having to lie to cover up previous lies, thereby reinforcing the deceit.

This House has a duty to ensure that we do not set up a system that makes it easier for people to drift into deceit. A fundamental characteristic of the WFTC is that fraud is more likely.

Dawn Primarolo: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Pickles: No.

Throughout this speech, I have repeatedly referred to the Grundys. They have one distinct advantage. They are fictitious; they are played by professional and highly skilled actors. Thousands of families up and down the land are in similar circumstances, but will be made materially worse off by the Bill. *[Interruption.]* Their

[Mr. Pickles]

personal and financial circumstances will be broadcast to their work mates. They will be seen as a burden by their employers—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Rochdale (Lorna Fitzsimons) cannot keep shouting across the Chamber.

Mr. Pickles: I am grateful for your protection, Mr. Deputy Speaker, although I hardly noticed the hon. Lady.

A measure designed to fight low wages and poverty will play a significant role in forcing people into further dependency. This Bill avoids addressing harsh realities. This Bill is without explanation; this Bill is without answers. Ultimately, this Bill will betray precisely the people whom it seeks to help.

4.54 pm

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): I start by declaring a non-interest. I do not listen to "The Archers". I know little about its characters, and I feel, after listening to the speech by the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles), that that puts me at a severe disadvantage in debating the Second Reading of the Bill.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, South (Dawn Primarolo) on her promotion to the position of Paymaster General, and on the way in which she opened the debate. I thank her for the courtesy that she showed by meeting me to talk about the Bill. If her arguments did not fully persuade me, it was not because they were not applied effectively. I apologise for the fact that she has heard some of what I shall say this afternoon.

I wish to underscore what my hon. Friend the Paymaster General said when she said that the Bill needed to be seen as part of a total package that the Government are putting forward to try to re-emphasise the importance of work in our society. For we are not, as a Government, merely thinking about a working families tax credit; we are thinking of that together with a series of measures designed to ensure that, when people are available to work, they can work and are better off.

I have always supported the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his aim of reducing the starting rate of tax to 10p. I know that there are clever people in this world who say, "You can spend the money more effectively on raising allowances and so on; that would be a far better way of helping people who are poor"—but in 20 years of representing the constituents of Birkenhead, I have never met anyone who said that changes in tax allowances had played a part in convincing them to work. Constituents have constantly talked about what their rate of tax will be if they can work, or if they can work harder. The aim of reducing the starting rate of tax is therefore another part of the Government's strategy to try to ensure that people can move safely from benefit to work and be better off.

Similarly, the Government have a major programme in developing still further their welfare-to-work initiatives. That is part of ensuring that people make the transition from benefit to work. It is also important to emphasise that what the Secretary of State for Education is doing, in emphasising the Government's commitment to raise standards in school, is part of our welfare-to-work programme. For the first time, it will be our aim that every child leaves school able to read and write. Some people listening in to the debate will say, "What an extraordinary country it is that has to adopt that objective." Well, that is the world that we now live in, and which we want to change. That objective will have the important effect of shifting our society from a culture of over-dependence, in the sense that people have drawn benefit when that is unnecessary, to one that rightly emphasises the key place that work can, and should, play in most of our lives—at least for part of the time.

The Bill must be viewed alongside all those other measures. Its essential aim is to ensure that, when people do work, they will be better off than they are on benefit.

I emphasise that I am speaking in general support of this measure, but I—like you, Mr. Deputy Speaker—have been in the House for some time, and those of us who have been in the House for some time realise that the debate has almost come full circle. I was here when the present official Opposition were in government and introduced family credit. I rose from the Opposition Benches to express critical support for that measure, although the official line was one of condemnation, emphasising instead the importance of Scrooge employers and of taxpayers subsidising low-pay employers.

On balance, I did not agree with that line. I thought that there was significant advantage in a new scheme that would help people who were working, but I did not think that my colleagues in opposition at the time were entirely wrong to emphasise the dangers. I am glad to be speaking now from the Government Benches and I merely register the worries expressed by us in opposition. I did not think that they carried the debate then, and I do not think that they carry it now.

My two main worries about the Bill are, first, that some women might become more vulnerable as a result of the measure than they would otherwise be, and secondly, that there is a danger of fraud. It was entirely proper and understandable that, when they heard about the Government's new initiative, a large number of hon. Members on both sides of the House were concerned about who would receive the benefit. I suggest that although we should not dismiss that concern, it is no longer the main concern.

In opening our discussion today, my hon. Friend was right to emphasise that in many senses the Bill is a measure to help single parents and to ensure that they can successfully move from benefit to work, where they consider that desirable. However, many single parents in work are particularly vulnerable, given the nature of their employment and some of the employers they come up against.

In my surgery I have met single mothers who, because they have got on the wrong side of the employer or because the employer has tried to take advantage of them, sometimes sexually, have left their employment, and rightly so. Under the present system of family credit, they have done so knowing that their payments of family credit, often worth twice their wage packet, are safe in the post office or will be delivered to their bank account.

My worry about the proposed system is that it will strengthen the position of employers who abuse their positions. Not only will they behave badly about whether wages are to be paid, but they will have control over the immediate payment of the new working families tax credit.

I raised that point with my hon. Friend this morning, and I was much impressed by her determination to ensure that we have a system that can respond quickly and sensitively to mothers—and possibly the odd father—who find themselves in that position. I should add as a rider that I now know that there is all the difference between a Minister wanting something to happen and being committed to it, and what actually happens at grassroots level.

Dawn Primarolo: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. This is an important point, which should be made clear to the House. In circumstances in which an employer did not pay or interrupted the payment of the tax credit, action would be taken. I explained to my right hon. Friend that a code of practice is currently being developed with the employers, and that there will be penalties against employers if they try such things.

More important, if the parent—the young woman in the scenario that my right hon. Friend described—tells the Inland Revenue what is happening, the Inland Revenue will move to ensure that she continues to receive her money, and will deal with the employer separately.

Mr. Field: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for putting on the record what she kindly said to me this morning. All hon. Members will want the measure to operate as she describes, and when we have details of it, hon. Members will use their best intentions to make that machinery as effective as possible

I merely register the fact that I have been here too long not to know that we can express wishes in the Chamber, implement reforms and then find that they do not work out quite as we wanted them to. When they were in government, the Conservatives would make changes in housing benefit, everything would seem to be hunky-dory, and then they would come up against their constituents and all hell would break loose. I know that my hon. Friend is aware of the issues, especially given her past interests. She would, however, be aware of them in any event. We must watch the position very carefully.

There is concern about fraud. The hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar kindly quoted what I had already said about that aspect of working families tax credit. I wish neither to withdraw nor to repeat my observations, but I am happy to agree that the hon. Gentleman reported me correctly.

Again, this is a question of power—power in the workplace. We sometimes encounter a bit of that when we come up for reselection, but generally we are in a privileged position. We are not, thank goodness, in the position of some of our constituents in the real world, who must sometimes deal with not very pleasant employers. It is clear from the work undertaken by fraud officers in the DSS on family credit that some employers want to strike a bargain with their employees, encouraging them to submit false returns in regard to their wages so that they can claim the maximum, which the employers then top up with cash in hand.

My hon. Friend mentioned steps that the Inland Revenue would take to counter the problem. I welcome those steps, but I should add that it is one thing to discuss such matters in a detached, almost clinical way in the Chamber, and another to know how the real world works, and to appreciate the pressure that some employers will put on decent people to connive at fraud. Certain people, of course, do not require any pressure.

This measure is based on experience in America, where fraud is generally accepted to account for about 15 per cent. of the American equivalent of working families tax credit. If the same happens here, we will face a fraud bill of £750 million. In Committee, we shall need to consider carefully how much more effectively the Treasury will protect taxpayers' money than the DSS—sadly—has in the past.

I have serious reservations, but the Bill is part of the Government's overall strategy to move from what has been, for too many people, a welfare culture providing few chances, to a culture that offers real opportunities in the place of work. It would be entirely wrong for us to see the Bill in isolation from the introduction of a national minimum wage, and from the tax changes that the Chancellor has made and wishes to make in the future. It would also be wrong for us to see it in isolation from the Government's important welfare-to-work initiative, which they will develop further. I am happy to give qualified approval to the Bill's Second Reading.

5.9 pm

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): It is a pleasure to follow the characteristically measured and constructive criticism expressed by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field).

Let me explain at the outset the distinction between the Liberal Democrat and Conservative approaches. Both parties will vote against the Second Reading, but for rather different reasons. The Conservatives' reasoned amendment says that one of the reasons why the official Opposition will vote against the Bill is the fact that it will increase the social security budget.

We welcome the additional £1.5 billion incorporated in the Bill, but that money could have been better spent. I was therefore disappointed when the Paymaster General chose to misrepresent our position, saying that we were opposed to supporting the low paid. On the contrary, we would spend that money more efficiently and in a more targeted way, and give extra help to the low paid.

All the desirable features of the tax credits scheme could have been introduced through reforms to family credit under the existing benefits system. The Bill's unique, distinctive feature—indeed, almost the only thing in it—is that tax credits will be paid through the pay packet. That is also its fundamental flaw. There are four or five substantive reasons why payment through the pay packet is a mistake, most of all—and first of all—the effect on women.

On the radio this morning, the Paymaster General tried to present the measure as pro-women—I would argue that it could be anti-women. This morning, the Paymaster General briefed the press about the recipients of family credit; she knew that we would make a powerful case this afternoon and got her spin in first. She said that half the people on family credit are lone parents, so the purse-to-wallet issue is irrelevant. We agree. She also said that, of the remainder, up to 25 per cent. are couples in which the woman is the principal breadwinner, so if the tax credit goes through the pay packet the purse-to-wallet argument is irrelevant. We agree.

I am concerned about the 300,000 couples receiving family credit where the man is the principal breadwinner. I asked the Library to work out how much family credit is paid to the women in those households. The figure is

[Mr. Steve Webb]

£900 million. The Government can have it one of two ways: either the money will predominantly be paid through the pay packet or it will not. If not, all this guff about the beneficial effects of paying it through the pay packet goes out of the window, because for lone parents it does not matter and the self-employed and women breadwinners are irrelevant. In respect of couples where the man is the principal breadwinner the response is, "It will go to the woman anyway."

If the money is paid through the pay packet—as the Government want, and as they have set up a huge bureaucracy to achieve—women will have to negotiate with their partners to get back the £900 million that they currently receive.

Ms Keeble: Perhaps because there are not many women on the Liberal Democrat Benches, the hon. Gentleman has not been involved in the kind of discussion that Labour Members have had. Does he not accept—*[Interruption.]* This is a perfectly fair point. Does he not accept that the child care tax credit—which will pay for child care, either on invoices or receipts, and will go straight to the person giving the care—will make it possible for women, for the first time, to go out to work knowing that they can have quality, flexible child care? That will be greatly beneficial for women and is what makes the measure positive for women.

Mr. Webb: The hon. Lady points out the beneficial effects of subsidising child care. I would argue that there is a more effective way of achieving that, rather than having a child care tax credit that reaches beyond those on £30,000 a year. I accept what the hon. Member for Gravesham (Mr. Pond) said about £38,000 being an extreme figure, that five kids meant £150 a week and all the rest of it. Even so, stretching the figure to £30,000 a year is hardly targeting the low paid. That is not a sensible way to spend public money.

We should use the same money—not extra money—on cash subsidies for families with younger children and allow parents to choose whether they want to pay someone to look after their children or whether they want to do it themselves. The Government are obsessed with paying people to look after other people's children; they do not give people a choice.

Mr. Pond: On the particular example of how well targeted the working families tax credit is, the hon. Gentleman will be aware of the work of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which tells us, of course, that the greatest benefit will be obtained in those deciles in the lower part of income distribution. Surely that suggests that the measure is rather well targeted, certainly in comparison with other ways of spending the money.

Mr. Webb: As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, I am vaguely familiar with the work of the IFS. The point that I made to the Paymaster General was that, if the poorest 350,000 or so recipients of family credit continue their present working hours—I accept that, in an ideal world, we want them to work more—they will not get a penny out of the measure: the poorest family credit recipients will not get the money. The people who will get the money are those further up the income scale. I accept that huge amounts will not go to people on £30,000 a year, but the benefit will be paid further up the income ladder than I would like.

If we follow the approach that I have described, where the additional cash goes to families with young children, including those on the minimum amount of family credit, that would focus help on the poorest family credit recipients, which I thought was the point.

Ms Keeble: Those are important points, but does the hon. Gentleman not accept that one of the reasons why we need to get women to go to work is that the economy needs some of their skills? As we know, there are certain sectors where we desperately need women: for example, nursing. Child care is a real barrier; it is wildly expensive. For all sorts of reasons, therefore, it is important to ensure that women have the option of going back to work, and flexible child care should be available if they work shifts, so that they can work and be sure that their children are being properly looked after.

Mr. Webb: The hon. Lady raises an important problem: the loss of women's human capital while they are out of the labour market and the loss of their valuable skills, which we do not want to lose. She says that it is important that they have flexible child care. If we follow my route of giving them cash through extra money for the under-fives, they can spend it on flexible child care which does not have to be registered, whereas the Bill allows only for registered child care, which is often not available for people such as nurses who work shifts.

The evidence on the incentive effects of the scheme—making people who are out of work move into work—is almost invisible. The hon. Member for Gravesham mentioned the Institute for Fiscal Studies. We understand from the "Today" programme that it has calculated that the incentive effect might lead to 40,000 extra families working.

I have no idea whether that is the right figure; nor do the Government. Here is a £5 billion scheme—the existing £3.5 billion and another £1.5 billion on top—and the incentive effects are simply not known; the Government do not have a clue.

We support that £1.5 billion because it helps poor people in a static situation. If it has a beneficial incentive effect, that is all well and good, but that is not the key point. The measure will benefit people who find it hard to get by but there is no evidence that it will have a big incentive effect.

Ms Margaret Moran (Luton, South): Will the hon. Gentleman not accept the view of the Child Poverty Action Group that the measure offers a well-targeted approach to dealing with those working families in poverty? It says:

"Only 5 per cent. of Family Credit Claimants benefit from the current childcare disregard. The new childcare tax credit will help more families. It is more generous and is payable for children up to age 14".

It is targeted more closely on the poorest families, so it will benefit those families to a greater extent than family credit could ever do, with cash benefit in the way that the hon. Gentleman implies.

Mr. Webb: The hon. Lady might like to look at what the Chancellor of the Exchequer did in his first Budget.

He said, "There is a £60 child care disregard in family credit. I am going to raise it to £100." I was sitting in the Chamber and I recall cheers from Labour Members. I tabled a question asking how many people would benefit from the change and the answer came back, "3,000".

The Chancellor has finally caught up with the point that we already knew: the child care disregard was indeed an ineffective way in which to support families and children; it did not work. The question is: is it better to have a child care tax credit that reaches people on £20,000, £25,000, £30,000 or more, and probably does not do much for people on very low wages because they cannot afford to pay for registered child care; or would it be better to pay the money in cash, through child credits on the tax credit, to families with younger children?

The Government must trust people. They must let them have the cash and decide what to do with it, rather than insist that they spend it in a particular way. Then those people can decide who brings up their children.

The effects on women are clear cut. The response of the Minister so far has been, "Not to worry. If there is a problem about whether the woman will see the money, there is a choice," but the right hon. Member for Birkenhead has raised the important issue of relationships in which there is no equality—where there is an imbalance of power. One example is violence in families. If we were debating a different issue, Labour Members would be telling us time and again that violence in families is a huge problem and that tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of women may suffer abuse or unequal power within a relationship. If there is a choice as to who gets the money, who will get it in those families? Will it go to the mother or to the father? We all know the answer. In those families, the money will go to the father.

Dawn Primarolo: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would like to explain to the House the current arrangements for family credit. Although he touches on an important point about violent relationships, the family credit system does not deal with it either because the woman can be forced to sign the money away and, as he knows, it can be cashed by either partner.

Mr. Webb: Inevitably, there cannot be a perfect system that takes into account difficult family relationships, but the present presumption is that the money will go to the mother. That is better than a system that provides a balanced choice. My hunch is that the new system will be loaded to try to encourage payment through the pay packet. If it is not, what is the point of the Bill? The Bill has only one significant provision—payment through the pay packet.

Last night I was surfing the net—my nickname is "Worldwide"—and at 10 o'clock I came across the Inland Revenue website. I discovered a memo from the Inland Revenue on the working families tax credit and disabled persons tax credit. I have seen Labour Members waving that document around. It comprises pages of riveting detail about the complexities of the new scheme. It does not just say that the money is to be paid to the carer, but raises a variety of issues.

Let me give the House one example of the absurdity of the regime that we are about to introduce. Let us suppose that someone is on strike. It is a shame that the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) is not here because we could be to referring to a striking mineworker who receives the tax credit through his pay packet. When he goes on strike, he no longer receives pay from his employer, so what happens to the tax credit? To get the tax credit, he has to get a form from his employer saying how much tax credit has been paid. He then sends the form to the Inland Revenue which pays him the money directly until the strike is over, when he sends the Revenue another form to enable the tax credit to be paid through his employer. How many people in such circumstances would be able to get a form from their employer? As there are not many mineworkers in my constituency, I am more concerned about the children who will be affected. Any interruption in the payment of tax credit—which would not occur under family credit—will create problems for the children concerned.

Dawn Primarolo: The hon. Gentleman touches on an important issue relating to certainty of delivery of the tax credit. He uses the example of a trade dispute. I hope that he has noticed that the code of practice and the procedures that are notified by the Inland Revenue state that the Inland Revenue must be informed. If an employer refuses to co-operate, the employee can tell the Inland Revenue and it will pursue the matter. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Inland Revenue already has powers to demand and obtain information which it uses in respect of PAYE and national insurance contributions.

Mr. Webb: Does the Minister accept that any period without cash could cause problems for the children concerned? How long does she think it will be before it is clear that an employer is not co-operating? Let us suppose that a striking employee is paid once a month and approaches the payroll office towards the end of the month. The payroll people agree to provide a certificate but say, "We're a bit busy at the moment. Maybe at the end of next week." Time goes by and the child goes without.

Dawn Primarolo: The hon. Gentleman will also know that the provisions state that an employer who fails to deliver to the employee as specified by the Inland Revenue would be in default and the Revenue would deal with the matter. The hon. Gentleman is trying to suggest that people will go without money, yet there are provisions to ensure that that does not happen.

Mr. Duncan Smith *rose—*

Mr. Webb: The hon. Gentleman may wish to intervene.

Mr. Duncan Smith: I am grateful. The real point—which the Minister has totally missed—is that she assumes that all the people whom the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) is describing are capable, clear thinking and not likely to be under any pressure from a difficult employer, particularly at a difficult time. That is quite the wrong assumption. The worst-off—the people who are under most pressure—will not be able to make those assumptions, and they will be scared.

Mr. Webb: There may be redress after the event, and it may be that—some weeks down the line—it gets sorted

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out. However, the employee has to obtain a certificate and it may take him a week to find out that he cannot. He then complains, and there then must be an investigation. All of that takes time. None of it is necessary bureaucracy—the Government should simply pay the money to the principal carer and get on with it.

In terms of the effect on women, the Minister cannot have it both ways. Either the carers will claim it—in which case we do not need the whole edifice of bureaucracy—or the credit will be paid through the pay packet, in which case women will be deprived of £900 million, which they will have to try to ask for.

The second big problem is the effect on business. I have tabled written questions to find out whether the tax credit will be a burden on small firms. I have asked at what point does somebody's earnings become such that the tax credit to which he is entitled becomes greater than the income tax and national insurance that his employer has to pay to the Government.

A two-child family with one earner can be earning £200 a week—£10,000 a year—and have a net entitlement. In other words, a small employer who employs one person, who has two kids, on £10,000 a year will have to pay net money to the employee, and the Government will have to sub money through the firm. Now, £10,000 is not a particularly low figure, and I have tried to ascertain how many people are in that situation. That is a complex question—it depends on the number of children someone has, the earnings of the spouse and so forth.

I have found out how many people are working for smaller firms—firms with less than 25 employees; most of the firms will have very few employees—and earning less than £10,000 as a family. There are 200,000 couples with children in that position, and another 200,000 lone parents. If all of those people were the sole employees of firms, small businesses would have to pay them money and the Government would have to pay the small businesses money.

The Minister will say, "Not to worry. All the firm has to do is to say to the Government that it thinks that it will have to pay some net money next month, and that it would like the cash up front." However, the firm may have to give at least three weeks' notice, unless it pays on a weekly basis. What if the Inland Revenue is a touch bureaucratic? It is quite busy at this time of year. Might not it have other things on its mind?

Clearly, there will be cash ramifications for small firms. The small businesses of this land are not jumping up and down with joy at the prospect of administering the scheme. However, the Government do not know how many firms are in that position. I have asked them—the answer is not available. How can the Government introduce such a scheme without knowing what effect it will have?

The scheme will not just affect firms. What about people with complex circumstances? What about people who change their job? The Inland Revenue document says that if someone works for two employers, the person who pays that individual the most pays that person the tax credit—fine. If someone starts a second job, the tax credit is paid to that person while the system is being worked out. It is then paid to the employers, once the system is up and running. If someone leaves one of the firms—which may be quite common for people with multiple employment—that person tells the Inland Revenue, and gets a form from the employer which gives the amount of tax credit. He sends that to Revenue, which pays him directly while the matter is sorted out. It tells the second employer that the employee has moved, and then that person starts getting the tax credit from that second employer. What is the point of all that bureaucracy? Why not just pay family credit? Why not just get on with it? What is this change achieving?

A worse example than changing jobs is changing family circumstances and relationship breakdowns. The tax people are not used to dealing with cohabiting couples—tax allowances are given to married couples. However, the benefits system is used to recognising cohabiting couples. Suppose a relationship—between a cohabiting or married couple—breaks down. What happens to the tax credit? Suppose the man is getting the credit through the pay packet. Does the woman who has moved out contact the Revenue and say, "I have moved out with my child"? Again, the woman could be leaving because of a violent relationship. If the Revenue contacts the firm to say that it should stop paying the tax credit, what is the first question that the small firm will ask? It will be, "Why are we not paying you this tax credit any more?" The answer might be, "Well, the wife's left me."

The new system is much more intrusive than paying family credit to the carer, because in that case, if the wife leaves, the money goes with her and the children do not have to go without money for a week or two weeks. Under the new system, the wife has to apply to the Inland Revenue, at a very difficult time in her life; the Revenue has to send a letter to the employer; the employer has to tell the employee and perhaps ask embarrassing questions; and the employee may appeal to the Inland Revenue and say that his wife has not left him and is merely visiting her sister. That is all irrelevant, so why not stick with family credit?

Fraud is another problem with payment through the pay packet. The Paymaster General asked why the position was different with the new system. The obvious answer is that the money goes through the firm's books and not directly to the recipient, so the firm has an incentive to declare payments lower than the real wages, make up the difference in cash and pocket the tax credit.

There is a provision in the Bill that says that, if people are unfairly dismissed because they are on tax credit, they can do something about it, but the right hon. Member for Birkenhead mentioned examples of the insidious pressure that people will be under. The Bill is a fraud's charter. It has been said that one should design fraud out of benefit systems, but the new scheme designs it in.

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North): Is not the hon. Gentleman aware that there is plenty of evidence that employers advertise jobs as suitable for claimants of family credit? The point that he is making is equally true of the existing system.

Mr. Webb: It is not true, because firms like people on family credit, as they can pay them low wages without the administrative burden of the tax credit. They will certainly not advertise for people on the tax credit. The question was asked how prospective employers,

when choosing between two candidates, would know whether one was entitled to the credit. In an informal conversation with job applicants, any shrewd employer will be able to ascertain whether they have kids; it will not be difficult.

The Bill is a missed opportunity to reform the in-work benefit system. Martin Taylor was asked to consider the integration of tax and benefits. His report said that he had not considered the tax credit in any detail because it was a given fact and he knew that the Government would introduce it. The task force was not asked to think the unthinkable or come up with a good scheme; it was told that there would definitely be a tax credit.

Instead of integrating tax and benefits, we could first have integrated in-work benefits one with another, integrated out-of-work benefits with in-work benefits and then, having done all that, thought about integrating a unified benefit system with the tax system. Instead, the Government went crashing ahead with the tax credit and said that housing benefit was too complicated to deal with. They said that that benefit was a nightmare and they would not touch it or do anything about mortgages; but the evidence is that the lack of help with mortgages for the low paid is one of the biggest genuine disincentives to work.

We have heard that there is not much evidence on incentives, but research by the Department of Social Security cited loss of help with housing costs on taking a job as one of the biggest barriers—much bigger than child care—to moving off income support. If the system had spent the same amount, focused on the lower-paid, with some help, for example, for people with mortgages, it would have done much more for incentives.

The child care subsidy reaches a long way up the income scale. People on the minimum wage of £3.60 an hour, working 30 hours a week, will pay income tax, but people on higher-rate tax will get child care subsidies. Has not the world gone wrong somewhere? Is not that a crazy system? Incentives are essential to the whole argument. Where is the evidence?

Yvette Cooper: I accept the point that the research is limited, but the most reliable research on work incentives has been carried out by David Card in the Canadian system. One group of lone parents was given extra help—a credit at a similar level to the working families tax credit—and another group was not. The group that was given the credit had an employment rate of 25 per cent., as opposed to 12 per cent. in the other group. Is not that pretty substantial evidence in favour of work incentives?

Mr. Webb: The hon. Lady is knowledgeable on those matters and will know that the Canadians scrapped the scheme—

Yvette Cooper: Not that one.

Mr. Webb: Well, I look forward to hearing the details.

As far as I know, the only empirical research done on this scheme—not the Canadian model, with its very different income distribution, family structure, employment patterns and all the rest—by my former colleagues at the Institute for Fiscal Studies, shows that it would have little effect. That is the only evidence that we have to go on.

The taper has come down from 70 per cent. to 55 per cent, which brings in people further up the income distribution scale. The Paymaster General says that that is good for incentives. What about the person who works overtime to make ends meet—as many families do—and who starts to receive working families tax credit? He or she will have more income for working the same number of hours. What would any hon. Member do if he or she were faced with working overtime, possibly to the detriment of family life, and then could suddenly get the same income by working fewer hours? Any person would give up on the overtime and cut the number of hours worked. That may well be a desirable outcome, but it is an example of one group of people who may cut their hours in response to the tax credit. In other words, lower tapers do not make people work more hours; they may make them work fewer.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): What surprises me most about the hon. Gentleman's argument is that, in the country that works the longest hours in Europe, he is suggesting that it is good to promote the idea of mothers and fathers working longer hours. That is a peculiar suggestion and I hope that he can reassure me that he is not saying that. Does he not think that it would be a benefit to have a system that reduces the incentive for people to work excessive hours, so that they can spend time with their children?

Mr. Webb: The hon. Lady knows that she is misrepresenting my argument grotesquely. I picked the example of overtime because those hours are discretionary and can be changed at fairly short notice. Other labour market choices will result from the changed tapers and they will mean people working less, particularly second earners. I suspect that the hon. Lady supports second earners and believes that married women, for example, should take paid employment given the opportunity. The measure may have beneficial effects for people who are unemployed, but it will be a disincentive for existing workers, in particular second earners, and I was not aware that it was Labour party policy to return to the traditional working family.

Mr. Bercow: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with the view expressed by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), if I remember rightly in August 1998, when he observed that the family tax credit venture could take the pressure off improving productivity and thereby the scope for increasing real wages?

Mr. Webb: My argument this afternoon has been that the £1.5 billion should be spent, but not in that way. We want to assist people who are in low-paid work by providing the floor of the minimum wage, which is where we differ. That floor would stop employers from depressing wages and a subsidy would enable people to stay in their jobs, perhaps helping with the mortgage or giving cash help towards child care. I am not particularly concerned about the hon. Gentleman's point.

Drawing my thoughts together, all the welcome aspects of the tax credits could have been achieved through family credit reform. Nothing in the Bill was necessary and nothing in it could not have been done through such a reform. We support the extra cash, but not to be spent in that way. Surely it is legitimate to point out that an

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addition to Government spending could have been spent more effectively. That is not an unreasonable argument and it is not one that the Paymaster General should parody.

The measure has been introduced in a hurry, without considering housing benefit and the linkages—

Ms Moran: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Webb: No, I must conclude and give other hon. Members a change to speak.

The Bill will take money from women and put burdens on business. It will not cope with flexible families and the flexible labour market that we have today. There is a strong case for helping low-paid workers more, but the Bill is not the way to do it.

5.39 pm

Lorna Fitzsimons (Rochdale): I was surprised at the opening remarks from both Front-Bench spokesmen for the main Opposition parties because I thought that the one thing they would acknowledge—the Liberal Democrat spokesman, in particular—was that it is better to make work pay if one is trying to help families and children in poverty. All the evidence shows that in-work benefits alleviate poverty. That must be endorsed in the first place.

Secondly, we must be encouraged by the Government's work on the tapers in implementing the working families tax credit. Every Select Committee report acknowledges that it is tapers that clobber people in much of the benefit system.

As for our guided tour of the Grundy family, I am glad that the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) listens to "The Archers", because there was not much other substance to his speech. We did not learn whether his concern about the complexities of the child care tax credit stemmed from his wanting it to work or whether he acknowledged that the barrier—primarily for women but also for families—to accepting work is being able to find good-quality, affordable child care. Perhaps when the hon. Gentleman returns he will answer the question that he was not courteous enough to allow me to ask when I tried to intervene on him. Since the working families tax credit was first introduced by the Chancellor, the Government have spent a long time developing, through extensive consultation, a model that will advance the quality of life of working families.

Many have argued that the new credit will disfranchise women. There is a serious point about disparity of access to income in the home. However, given what has happened since we last discussed that, we should congratulate Ministers on how far they have gone to alleviate concern about the problem of moving income from the purse to the wallet. The Treasury team's work demonstrates the advantage of having more women Members. I congratulate the Treasury team on the fact that it includes a record number of women. The advantage of having so many women in the team is shown by the advance they have made in choice and in safeguarding the position of women in the transfer from family credit to the payment of working families tax credit.

I want to draw the House's attention to several points that I hope will be elaborated on; my hon. Friend the Paymaster General touched on some of them. Much has been made, certainly in the headlines, about the number of women involved. Most people who receive family credit are women because they are single parents. We are talking about a minority of people, who, without the diligent work of Ministers and officials, could have suffered from a transfer from the purse to the wallet.

Currently, in the small number of cases involved, if the form is not signed by the man, the woman cannot receive family credit no matter what she does. The work done on the working families tax credit means that the Inland Revenue will operate a three-stage approach. That will mean that there is a chance that women, if the information on the form can be verified, will be able to receive working families tax credit even without the male partner's signature. Women who have problems in the home—domestic violence has been mentioned—will have a greater chance of accessing the money than they do now. If the form is not sent back to the Inland Revenue, it will be followed up with a phone call and, in some cases, a visit. That will mean a better chance of targeting help at poor women and children in difficult relationships than ever there was under family credit. I welcome that step forward to making work pay and alleviating the poverty of children and women. Along with the Government's historic increase in child benefit, it represents a dramatic change in the existences of people in poverty.

I have another point about choice. The form makes no presumption about gender; it talks of the applicant and the supporting applicant. As we transfer from family credit to working families tax credit, the form will go to the current recipient. So for the large part, the woman will be filling out the form. Even though she is not the main earner, she can choose to fill out the main applicant's side of the form, which is similar to the family credit form. Even if the woman is not the person in work, she will be able to receive the working families tax credit. We are automatically putting the cards in the hands of women.

I beg to differ with the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb), who suggested that the position would be worse for women. There is a minute possibility that it could be and I do not underestimate that, but one cannot say that the same problems do not exist in the current benefits system—as they would in any system. I believe the hon. Gentleman acknowledged that.

Mr. Webb: I promise not to hog the hon. Lady's time—she would not let me anyway. The money will go through the pay packet either in lots of cases or in not very many. If it will do so in lots of cases, lots of women will lose money; if it will do so in not many, we do not need this whole edifice. Which is it—lots or not many?

Lorna Fitzsimons: You make great play of the internet, Mr. Worldwide Webb—I am glad you have such an interesting moniker. The Inland Revenue website, which is available in the Vote Office, gives all the details of how the scheme will be implemented. It says that there are three ways in which people can elect to have the money paid. One is by girocheque. The woman can choose. The money does not have to go through the pay packet, even if the woman is the earner. She can choose to have it paid a different way. That is laid out on the website and, as you have seen it, I am surprised that you did not refer to that fact—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Lady because I do not want her to think that I am telling her off all the time, but I have to tell her about the term "you".

Lorna Fitzsimons: I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I know that it is a terrible habit. It is just that I am getting into my stride and enjoying the debate. You will be aware, given that you have been a Member of Parliament for some time, that, of the 767,000 recipients of family credit in 1998, just over 300,000 women could possibly fit into these circumstances. It is known that a third of those already elect to put the money into a joint bank account or make some other similar arrangement. So we are talking about two thirds of those 300,000. I wish that we would put this matter in context. I am not trying to belittle the effect on those women's lives, but the reality is that we are not talking about the vast number of people currently in receipt of family credit.

The Government have tackled the problems that were set out when the working families tax credit was first debated on the Floor of the House. We must acknowledge that there has been vast movement since then to ensure that we go forward with the philosophy of making work pay while trying to protect women in vulnerable situations and provide choice.

The biggest barrier to work or choice is child care. Many women do not have the choice to work because they just cannot afford child care. The issue that I was clobbered with on the doorstep when I was canvassing before my election to this wonderful place was child care. People said that they could not afford to work. With the working families tax credit, and especially the child care element of it, literally hundreds of women whom I canvassed will be able to choose to work. That has to be a welcome move. Many of them are single mothers. Many of them trained before they became single parents and they want to use the investment that we made in them and they made in themselves. Now they will be able to.

Some hon. Members have said that child care tax credit is not referred to in the Bill. It is clearly referred to in the whole gamut of documentation on the working families tax credit. The child care tax credit is integral with the working families tax credit. The fact that the Government realise the reality of working families' lives and the barriers to employment shows the sensitivity of our Government. I am proud to sit on the Government Benches as we make the advances which, sadly, have been lacking over the past 20 years. I found the comments of the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar laughable, because I doubt the sincerity of his concern about the complexities or otherwise of the child care tax credit.

People inside and outside the House have argued that the tax credit puts single-earner couples at a disadvantage compared with single parents. There are many commentators in the Chamber today who are more eminent than I am, but having examined the details, I can tell the House that, under the working families tax credit, the positions of a single-earner couple and a single parent will differ only if, in certain cases, their entitlement to child care tax credit is different because of their different child care needs.

The whole structure of the working families tax credit contains no intrinsic disbenefit to single-earner couples. It is important that we nail that lie and so prevent people from claiming disingenuously that the WFTC is anti-family or pro-single parents. The measure is all about families, whether headed by single parents or by two parents. It is about making work pay for them and ensuring that their children are provided for.

We must bear in mind the anomaly whereby people on the sharpest end of poverty paid more tax. Under our proposals, people will earn more and keep more. In my constituency, the old work ethic persists: if people can get work, they will work as hard as they can; they are also prepared to work longer hours to earn a minimal additional sum, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) pointed out, places additional stress on the family unit. After our proposals are implemented, those people will have a chance to make real choices about whether to stay at home, to listen to the children read and to help them with homework.

People have claimed that the Bill is not a family friendly measure, but I beg to differ: the Bill will give families choices that they have never had before. I support the Bill and hope to participate in its progress through Parliament.

5.52 pm

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): I am sure that many Labour Members sincerely believe that the new arrangements contained in the Bill will help the less well-off, reduce poverty traps and provide incentives to work. The main cause of our opposition to the Bill is that, as the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) pointed out, it will be a disaster in practice.

Questions have been asked about problem cases, such as when someone is on strike or an employer is not behaving properly. We are told that people can go and complain to the Revenue and get the matter dealt with, but most companies Revenue offices are miles away, elsewhere in the country. How can we expect ordinary people to go to the extent of finding out where their company's Revenue office is, getting hold of someone there and raising their problem with that person? By the time all that has been done, people will be many weeks out of their money.

We have been assured that companies will not experience cash-flow strains and that there will be grants in the event of their paying out more than they are collecting. However, a company cannot get the grant until it knows what it is paying out. If cash-flow problems arise in a small company, weeks, if not months, will pass before agreement is reached with the Revenue and the grant is paid.

The Government have got themselves hooked on a concept that has been considered twice before in this country: in the early 1970s and in the 1980s. They are caught on the hook of thinking that the solutions and answers to our problems can be found in north America, where so many things are wonderful, without thinking through the nitty-gritty detail or conducting a proper case study into why, in Canada, a similar system went so wrong that it had to be scrapped. I have to say, with all due respect to the hon. Member for Rochdale (Lorna Fitzsimons), that it is shallow to believe that the proposals will solve all our problems without causing an administrative shambles.

My next point has been made light of, but I believe that it is not proper to come to the House with a Bill of this nature, from which the important provision of help with

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child care is excluded. In addition, the measure will place an enormous burden on businesses: an assessment was promised, but it has not been delivered. It is constitutionally improper to have reached Second Reading of a Bill without that Bill being in anything close to its final shape.

No doubt, the Government hope that the Bill will be popular, but in principle, I believe that the Bill is both conceptually wrong and wrongly drafted. The Government will rue the day they went ahead with the legislation when, as has been pointed out, there was already a perfectly effective and straightforward system of family credit. Family credit could be made more generous and the system tweaked about, but it must be acknowledged that administratively, it has been one of the most successful welfare arrangements.

My first specific objection relates to the near future. When the Social Security Committee took evidence from various civil servants at the Inland Revenue, I discerned a high risk that, over the next 18 months, the implementation of the WFTC will be chaotic. I was not satisfied by answers saying that issues of implementation were being adequately addressed. I do not doubt that the Revenue's staff have worked overtime and produced a detailed document, but it is most unlikely that the system will be up and running efficiently within 18 months of its being put into effect in the workplace and the massive change made from benefits distribution by the Benefits Agency to distribution via the employer or the Revenue.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): While on the subject of the Social Security Committee, will my hon. Friend remind the House of the amendments that he tabled with me and our hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride)? He has come to the fourth of those amendments, which deals with the cost of administration, but will he stress that we also tried to persuade the Committee to accept an amendment stating our concern that:

"this proposal will place the two couple household, one of whom works and one of whom looks after small children (the classic Beveridge family) in a disadvantaged position"?

Will my hon. Friend refer to our amendments at some point in his speech?

Mr. Flight: I thank my hon. Friend for reminding me of that. I shall come to the point he raises later and hope to pick up all the issues that were raised in the Select Committee. In reviewing the Select Committee report, both *The Times* and *The Independent* picked up concerns about points of principle, as well as considerable practical concern about whether the measure would be workable, especially during the next 18 months.

The works of professionals and welfare gurus that I have read all make one point: that it is dangerous to split the provision of welfare. How can one easily achieve a single gateway if different benefits are dealt with in different ways? It is pure semantics and window dressing to argue that we are not debating how family credit is paid. The Bill commences:

"family credit and disability working allowance to be known, respectively, as working families tax credit"—

in other words, distribution is an issue.

The bogus arguments about stigma add little to the debate. What matters is how much people get; to what extent the tax credit will act as an incentive or a disincentive to work; and how efficiently it is administered. Over the next 18 months, hundreds of thousands of people will not get their family credit benefits through the system on time. There will be much debate and dispute, with companies asking the Revenue how much the amount should be. In addition, the tax credit cannot easily be coded into income tax. Many ordinary people who are in need will suffer.

On the question of stigma, views differ. Many hon. Members will not have worked for medium-size businesses, which are major employers in this country. As one who has done so, I can tell the House that in such companies, everybody knows everybody else's business—it is not like the House of Commons.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): We know quite a lot here.

Mr. Flight: Yes, that may be true.

My point is that people will be curious about who is getting paid the credit, they will look it up on the net and they will find out. The proposals will make much more public than do the present arrangements those who are receiving family credit support. There is nothing to be gained in terms of reducing stigma and, potentially, there is much to be lost.

It is argued that the Bill will improve the problem of poverty traps and, at some levels, it may do so. However, hon. Members will know that between 469,000 and 1.2 million more people will now face marginal tax rates of 50 per cent., so disincentives may be alleviated in one part of the system, but even bigger ones will be placed elsewhere. As citizens advice bureaux and the hon. Member for Northavon have pointed out, unless mortgages and housing benefit are dealt with at the same time, there will still be major disincentives to work that the Bill does not address.

Being a little cynical and having spent 30 years working, I believe that there is a danger that the Bill will exert downward pressure on wages.

Yvette Cooper: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that that is a good argument for introducing a minimum wage to create a floor and prevent that downward pressure on wages?

Mr. Flight: That is one of the arguments for a minimum wage. The argument against is that it tends to price millions of people out of work. In Europe, 20 million people have been out of work because the minimum wage is too high. Let us hope that the Government have set the minimum wage so that Britain does not fall into that trap. Many employers are already well aware of the terms of family credit and are structuring pay policies to benefit from those. There will be an increasing element of the early 19th century Speenhamland legislation and deliberate subsidising of employment. If that does not constitute fraud, it will at least exert downward pressure on wages.

No one has mentioned this point, but I note that the Government have not changed the levels for disqualification, which begin at £3,000 of capital with

reductions in credit and go up to £8,000 of capital, at which point one would not qualify for any credit. I wonder how that squares with the Government's objective to persuade people to save more through the individual savings account scheme, which is intended to attract many more people who are not well off into saving. Those are self-defeating objectives.

On motivation, as the Government admitted, 470,000 more people will be dependent on welfare. The good side of that is that many of those people will be better off, but another half million people will have less incentive to work and be dragged into the problems of welfare dependency.

On expenditure, Conservative Members have made the macro-economic point that before the election, the Labour party argued that the overall social security bill would be reduced by better use of resources, which would enable there to be higher expenditure on education and health. Our major criticism is that the Government are contradicting that pledge because the bill is increasing enormously, partly due to these proposals. My additional worry is that the costs of the new arrangement could be astronomical. Instead of having a straightforward system, we may have one with substantial administrative costs. I wonder whether those have been taken into account in the estimate of the additional cost of £1.5 billion.

It has already been said that we will know the costs only when we know exactly what the proposals are, but the Institute for Fiscal Studies has suggested that if the arrangements for child care support are not tightly worded, they could add a further £4 billion. If they are tightly worded, they will not achieve the Government's aim. The proposals may, therefore, cost a further £5 billion and will not be particularly good value for money because much of that expenditure will be wasted.

As the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) and others have said, the proposals contain too much that is designed to encourage fraud, including fraud by employers. That will be semi-fraud rather than wicked fraud. I am vaguely aware that many of my constituents live in a household consisting of two partners, which is structured so that it does not qualify as such and a single mother can therefore gain maximum benefits. That practice will be encouraged by the Bill because, as I shall demonstrate, there will be a major difference in what families receive, depending on whether their household consists of one or two adults.

As I have said, the Bill provides further disincentives to save. I do not understand how the Government think that they can achieve both of their objectives at once.

Miss Kirkbride: I am interested in my hon. Friend's important point about savings, which I had not thought of despite being a member, as he is, of the Select Committee on Social Security. Will he make clear the Government's position on savings? What would happen if one gave children money to save?

Mr. Flight: I understand that the rules will not change from those that apply to family credit. Those who have £3,000 or more of capital receive a reduced amount of family credit according to a scale that goes up to £8,000 of capital, at which point they are entitled to no credit at all. I do not know how capital will be measured or whether equity in a house would be included. First, I draw attention to the fact that that issue needs to be addressed. Secondly, it is inherently contradictory to seek to encourage more people to save and to have a major disincentive to save in these proposals and elsewhere.

The Bill is anti-family according to my sense of the word "family". I brazenly take the view that a family normally consists of a mother and a father and their children, and that such a unit is best for bringing up children and enabling people to look after themselves in future. The proposals contain significant disincentives to form such units. As hon. Members have said, the main problem will arise from claiming the child care credit. A family of two parents and two children who earn £15,000 a year will receive only 25p of child care credit a week. A family of one parent and two children who qualify for the credit will receive £70.25 a week, which is a major disincentive to form a two-parent family.

Many hon. Members may have read an article by Martin Wolfe in the *Financial Times* earlier this year. He made the point that when one allows for the expenses of the husband or male partner, it is no longer worth having such a partner unless he earns almost £400 a week, which is the median level of pay in the country. Otherwise, he is a financial liability. The proposals will mean that more than 1 million people in two-earner couples will experience a fall in their returns from employment. That statistic was produced by the Treasury, not the Conservative party.

I remain of the view that children are best looked after by their mothers, particularly in their early years, if that is what their mothers want. Good habits and conditioning result, and children's prospects of being good citizens are greatly increased, as all studies show. It is complete madness to provide an incentive that will virtually drive wives—particularly those in decent, ordinary families in the middle of the income bracket—out to work for fiscal reasons. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members may laugh, but that will happen. I know many women who are extremely upset by that because they want to spend time at home looking after their children at least up to the ages of five and six.

I certainly hope that the child-minder arrangements—when we know what the Dickens they are—will include some provision to help women who want to stay at home to bring up their children. Regardless of what the Government say, this Bill encourages and supports, through welfare and fiscal incentives, the single-parent existence. It also establishes fiscal disincentives for mothers to stay at home. Both provisions are anti-family, and go against the traditions honoured by the great majority of people in this country.

The Bill is also unfriendly to children. The argument about the purse versus the wallet misses the fundamental point, which is that mothers should have the automatic right to get the money from the post office. That cannot happen with a scheme administered through the employer. For all sorts of reasons, rows will be caused or the wife will give way: as a result, the changes will mean that it will be more difficult, rather than easier, to get the money to the children. In Canada, it was concluded that the most effective way to help children was through generosity and good old-fashioned child benefit, which could easily be collected from the post office by the mother and which did not involve lots of administrative complications.

[Mr. Flight]

It has already been noted that employers could experience cash-flow costs and be out of pocket until they received the covering grant from the Revenue—and we all know how long getting money from that source can take. The scheme will be very costly to administer. Some hon. Members may believe that it will require only an automatic coding from the Revenue and that the process will be done by computer, but there will be all sorts of exceptions. Employers will be in the front line and required to do the jobs of the benefit office and the Revenue. No compensation is being offered to companies, and many small firms will not be able to afford the costs involved. The proposal is an incentive to bad and crooked employers. Moreover, it is wrong for employers and work colleagues to know about private matters, such as the amount of family credit a person is entitled to receive.

I have given five examples of the way in which all the implications of the Bill have not been thought out. There will be major negative effects. A proper study of the Canadian model has not been carried out, and the Bill will lead to a colossal administrative shambles in the next 18 months. Thousands of constituents will complain in our surgeries about the shambles that is the working family tax credit system, as they do about the Child Support Agency. In many ways, the effect of the Bill will be perverse. It will make worse the very problems that the Government, and all hon. Members, want to solve.

6.13 pm

Mr. Chris Pond (Gravesham): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight). He is a fellow member of the Select Committee on Social Security, albeit one with rather quaint views about the role of women in the home and in the workplace. I was also interested to hear that many bad and crooked employers exist who will exploit the system: I should have expected the Low Pay Unit, for which I used to work, to argue that case.

I am pleased that the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) is back in the Chamber. He made a moving opening presentation from the Dispatch Box about "The Archers", and informed the House that the Grundys were a fictitious family. That may have been a revelation to the hon. Gentleman, but it was helpful for the rest of the House. If the Grundys are fictitious, so was much of the hon. Gentleman's speech.

Mr. Pickles: If the hon. Gentleman is going to patronise me, he will have to do better than that.

Mr. Pond: I shall certainly try to do better in that regard as I develop my speech. However, to bring the hon. Gentleman up to date, I should tell him that Walter and Grace have passed away.

The hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar may have missed the point that the writers of "The Archers" were trying to make. The Grundys found themselves in a difficult position because, although on a low income, they tried to claim family credit—a system founded by the Conservative Government whom the hon. Gentleman supported. The Grundys found the system very complex, and we shall discover in future episodes whether, as a result, they end up as part of the 30 per cent. of families entitled to family credit who do not claim it.

In addition, the hon. Gentleman will know from the episodes that he has heard that Joe Grundy was not prepared to allow the family to claim family credit because, as he put it, he did not want them to "go on the parish". That is a major point.

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Pond: I shall develop my arguments a little further, and then give way. It is important to note that family credit carries a stigma and is considered to be rather degrading. It also creates a poverty trap.

Mr. Pickles: The hon. Gentleman is the one who has missed the point. What Joe Grundy was saying was that he did not want everyone to know that he was on the parish. The problem with WFTC is that everyone will know when a family is on the parish.

Mr. Pond: I am rather pleased that I gave way on that point, as it will at least amuse the House. Employers are of course well aware of their employees' circumstances and know when people receive family credit.

However, the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar has missed a more important point that renders inappropriate his reliance on "The Archers" as a vehicle for his opposition to this Bill. The great majority of low-income working families with children who will benefit from the working families tax credit bear little resemblance to the Grundys, and certainly not to Eddie and Joe. The real families involved want to do the best for their children: they are prepared to work hard but often their circumstances mean that it is difficult for them to do so.

During my years with the Low Pay Unit, before I became a Member of Parliament, I met many thousands of such people—hard working, wanting to take advantage of the available opportunities but too often, under the previous system, trapped in poverty and faced with the stigma of the means test. Is it not shameful that, under the previous Government, the largest single group among the poor comprised working families, in many of which the head of the household worked full time? The previous Government regarded those people not as the result of the failure of social policy, but as the instrument of economic policy.

Many of those people struggling to make ends meet also face the problem of the very high marginal tax rates built into the current system. The highest paid people in our society would never tolerate such rates, but those on the lowest incomes are expected to accept them as part of everyday life. I therefore welcome the Bill's proposals. I am also a rather enthusiastic supporter of the national minimum wage, and I cannot accept the suggestion made by the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs that it will cause millions of jobs to be lost. The evidence, both here and abroad, is that it will help to create employment.

Mr. Flight: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Pond: I will give way in a moment. The national minimum wage will ensure that people in employment have a decent income that will give them dignity.

Mr. Flight: With respect, my point was that, if the minimum wage is set too high, millions of people get

priced out of work. It is too high in continental Europe, where unemployment has reached 20 million. That is the risk. Secondly, I remarked that I hoped that the level had been set sufficiently low in this country not to cause that to happen.

Mr. Pond: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, but he should study the statistics. In the period during which this country pursued low-wage, sweatshop policies and reduced wages and employment rights to a level that would not have been acceptable elsewhere in Europe, proportionately fewer jobs were created here than in many other European countries. [HON. MEMBERS: "Rubbish."] Conservative Members have bought the propaganda that this country's sweatshop economy somehow created jobs. That was not the case, and I shall be happy to give them the details later.

In combination with the national minimum wage, the changes to national insurance contributions and the move towards a 10p starting rate for income tax, the Government's package of measures will mean that the lowest paid will for the first time in many years have the opportunity to have a decent basic level of income.

The working families tax credit will provide well-targeted assistance for those on low incomes. I recognise the expertise of the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb), but I believe that he is wrong on that matter. Virtually none of the benefits of the working families tax credit will go to those in the higher deciles of distribution, or even to the top 50 per cent. The credit will lift many working families out of the poverty trap, and it will lift the stigma associated with that.

Mr. Gibb: The hon. Gentleman talks about stigma, and about the 30 per cent. who do not claim family credit, a figure that I assume he has drawn from case loads. What does he expect the take-up rate to be of the working families tax credit on the basis of both case load and expenditure?

Mr. Pond: I cannot give a percentage.

Mr. Gibb: Higher or lower?

Mr. Pond: I believe that the take-up will be lower. [HON. MEMBERS: "Lower?"] I correct myself: the take-up rate will be higher under working families tax credit because the stigma will be much less than it is under family credit. Any Conservative Member who doubts that should ask what is the take-up of tax allowances in general; take-up is very high because there is less stigma attached to allowances than to social security benefits. Working families tax credit is another form of tax allowance.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) spoke of the importance of the proposed 10p tax band. He talked of "clever people" who argue that the money would be better spent on increased allowances. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has argued that revenue can help the poorest most if it is spent as allowances. However, that is not so clever: the incentive effects of tax reductions are far more effective if acting on the marginal rate of tax than if given as tax allowances. Tax allowances are poorly targeted: they give most cash to the highest income groups, and no help to those at the very bottom who pay no tax. The value of the working families tax credit is that it is one tax allowance that is effectively targeted at those on low incomes.

Mr. Bercow: We do not yet know how effective the working families tax credit will prove to be, but the hon. Gentleman's analogy with tax allowances is misguided. Does he agree that the point about allowances is that they are universal among those of the population who are in work? The new tax credit introduced by the Bill will not be universal. The same considerations simply do not apply.

Mr. Pond: The working families tax credit is not universal in the sense that it is intended to assist low-income working families with children, just as family credit is. My comparison was between family credit and the working families tax credit, which, because it is a form of tax allowance and associated with universal provision through the tax system, will have a higher take-up rate and less stigma.

Working families tax credit will provide a real incentive to make the transition into employment. The majority of people on low incomes desperately want to work, and I defy any Conservative Member to suggest otherwise. Under current arrangements, those people—and their children—pay a heavy price for making that transition and for pursuing the work ethic.

The Select Committee on Social Security examined proposals for the working families tax credit with some seriousness. The response of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor to our report was published earlier today. The Committee welcomed the attempt to provide greater help to low-paid working families, but it expressed concern about the purse-to-wallet issue, suggesting families should have the option of having the credit paid to either partner as a matter of choice. I am pleased that the Chancellor has made it clear—as did my hon. Friend the Paymaster General—that that choice will be available.

The Social Security Committee also recommended that free school meals should be extended to families who are awarded working families tax credit or the disabled persons tax credit. The Chancellor does not feel able to accept that proposal at present, but I hope that it will be further considered as the Bill goes through Standing Committee.

It has been suggested that working families tax credit may discriminate against single-earner couples. An amendment on that issue was rejected by the Social Security Committee, and it is clear that the only element of discrimination is the wholly justifiable matter of child care disregards.

The Bill represents the end of the Speenhamland system of family credit, and it will mean that working families receive a decent income with dignity.

6.26 pm

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Gravesham (Mr. Pond), who is my hon. Friend on the Select Committee on Social Security. His expertise on this subject is a great advantage to the House.

I believe that the Government are trying to approach these matters holistically through a strategy composed of many elements, of which the Bill is one. Certainly,

[Mr. Archy Kirkwood]

the Bill makes more sense viewed in that context, but I wonder whether there is more to the tax credit philosophy than is contained in the Bill. If the Chancellor has gone to the trouble of making a measure so complex, I wonder whether he may not have it in mind to develop the philosophy in other directions.

I appreciate that the Chancellor wants to smash down hurdles between benefit and work; we all agree with that objective. However, if he sees tax credits as a philosophy to be introduced to other parts of the benefit regime, we must proceed slowly and carefully to ensure that we do not kill that objective by contriving a bureaucratic and administrative edifice with which to achieve it.

Changing the culture is important, and the Government are trying to do that through all their reforms. Perhaps a tax credit approach is better than a benefit approach. The Government may wish to comment later on whether providing money by tax credit routes is better than doing so by benefit routes. Those matters are important, but I should like to be confident that the Bill is the end of the story and that there is no more to that story. I do not mean it pejoratively when I hint at there being an ulterior motive, but if the Government are thinking about developing tax credits in the round as a future means of reforming the benefits system, it would be better for us all to know that now rather than coming at the matter piecemeal in future.

The Social Security Committee—I am lucky enough to chair it—has considered the WFTC for more than a year, completing three reports. The most recent reports are referred to in the Order Paper, and I hope that that has informed the House of the body of work on which people may draw for information. There have been signs during the debate that some have already done so. Our reports will come into their own in the Standing Committee.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) spoke for much longer than I intend to take, and I hope that the Committee of Selection will take that into account when it decides which of us will sit on the Standing Committee: I understand how these things work, and I am keeping my fingers crossed.

I have two concerns that flow from what I have just said. The timing of the Bill is a little precipitate; I would have liked to take longer over the process. I perfectly understand that there is a political agenda and that the Government want to get the scheme up and running for the next election so that they can put it in the shop window, but I hope that, in trying to achieve everything as soon as possible—even by means of one phase in October and one next April—they are not being too ambitious.

The hon. Member for Gravesham mentioned that the Chancellor's reply to our most recent Select Committee report was helpful. It suggests to me that some areas still need to be worked on and that consultation is proceeding. However, with the best will in the world, we may not have enough time properly to sort out the issues. My hon. Friend the Member for Northavon eloquently adverted to some of them.

The hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) rightly said that there was some concern among Committee members—I felt it myself—that relying on affirmative or, indeed, negative procedure to pass secondary legislation dealing with extra elements connected with the Bill is inadequate. The Committee adverted to the fact that the Procedure Committee has been considering so-called super-affirmative orders, which need the House's special attention and could be amended. Nothing has happened to that recommendation. I should like to enlist the support of those on the Treasury Bench in trying to get the House authorities to look again at the matter.

I confess that I have changed my mind on the issue. Early in my career, when I was the social security spokesman for my party, I always argued that Departments should enshrine everything in primary legislation. The system is now so complicated that it is impossible to do so meaningfully, and there is a case for skeletal enabling Bills. To be fair to the House, even an affirmative, take-it-or-leave-it statutory instrument debate of an hour and a half, sometimes late at night, ending in a vote, is often inadequate. If the Departments involved can put pressure on the Modernisation Committee, the Leader of the House, and the Government Chief Whip, I would be encouraged. If the Government could say that such secondary legislation procedure will be given better consideration, I would have more confidence in this Bill turning out correctly.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): I have been listening to the hon. Gentleman's recent remarks with the greatest possible interest. Will he speculate on the possibility of pre-legislative scrutiny by his Select Committee of cases as complicated as the one we are debating? Would he favour that?

Mr. Kirkwood: In principle, I am in favour of more pre-legislative scrutiny. In three sections over the past year, the Select Committee produced a report. We took a bird's eye view of all the evidence in the public domain, took evidence from interested parties, which took a long time, considered the commission headed by Martin Taylor that the Government set up following the pre-Budget statement, and produced a report on implementation of tax credits. I accept that that is not pre-legislative scrutiny, but it comes as close as possible to it in the circumstances.

I would not like to begin experiments with pre-legislative scrutiny on such a politically contentious Bill. We have a way to go before Select Committee procedures are adapted so that they may conduct pre-legislative scrutiny maturely. In principle, however, such a prospect would certainly have been interesting.

I should like to point to a few of the Select Committee's recommendations, which I think are particularly important if we are to make the best of administrative difficulties. In order to try to smooth out peak demand, we recommended that

"during the first three months of WFTC only, provision should be made for new awards of Family Credit to last seven months"

—a full 30-week period—

"so that, in future, work can be distributed more evenly throughout the year".

We visited the family credit unit in Preston, where some very fine work was being done. I was impressed, as were other Committee members, by the staff's commitment to make the proposed system work. They are confident that they can get through much of it. It was clear, from the nature of family credit, that there are two

big peaks in work load. If some steps can be taken to smooth out the incidence of work as it falls on staff, there would be a better chance of dealing with some tricky administrative problems. At no extra cost to the Government, that could be considered and resolved.

Secondly, administration costs of the scheme will impose a financial penalty on small employers if we are not careful. I understand what the Government have said. My hon. Friend the Member for Northavon was eloquent on this point. The Minister will know of reimbursement schemes in the statutory maternity pay system. I tabled a written question on the matter on 5 November. The system entitles small employers to an additional 7 per cent. of the payment of statutory maternity pay. Even if we restrict such a scheme to small employers, there is certainly a prima facie case for considering some reimbursement for the administrative costs that will inevitably fall on some small businesses, which are not able to consider such costs with equanimity. The Government should look to that.

Thirdly, the integrated benefit information system of providing better-off advice—IBIS—is not yet reliable enough. The Inland Revenue will have to do much work so that it may more expeditiously provide better-off calculations for people who are contemplating moving into work and off benefit. The Committee recommends

"the provision of accessible points of contact in local areas where such advice is readily available".

That can and should be done. Indeed, it is in the Government's interests to do so in order that they maximise the benefit take-up.

If we change the tapers to take the benefit further up the income strata, we are likely to make more people eligible to tiny amounts of money. That is a disincentive to take-up. If people are eligible only for 50p or less than £1, they will say, "What is the point of the hassle?" The Minister must recognise that the Government might find low take-up rates because people will not be bothered to claim a few pennies.

Martin Taylor was very honest and open when giving evidence to the Select Committee. He spoke of the importance of culture changes, to which I have referred. He said:

"the drivers in these cases are not purely financial."

He also said that, when it comes to the incentive effect,

"we are dealing with intuition rather than any scientific proof".

For my money, I will watch this piece of legislation very carefully. I am prepared to be persuaded that it can be successful. It will be successful for me only if it succeeds in getting people off benefit and into work in big numbers. I would feel a little more comfortable if the Government had an idea of what measure of success they will apply. What test, what scales of justice, will they use to measure the effectiveness of the legislation? That important question will take time to resolve, but hon. Members on both sides of the House will be very interested in the answer.

A very important question lies behind the Grundy issue which has permeated the debate. Agricultural businesses find it very difficult to access family credit or any other means-tested benefit because of their income streams and the way in which their accounts are structured. The test period for income which determines eligibility to family credit is very difficult to ascertain. Mr. Grundy and many of my farming constituents would be an awful lot happier and would sleep easier in their beds at night if specific measures, forms and application methods for agricultural workers enabled easier access to benefit.

6.39 pm

Yvette Cooper (Pontefract and Castleford): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate, because I believe that the working families tax credit embodies several important principles. It is not just about a small, detailed mechanism to change the workings of the tax and benefit system. There are principles at stake: first, about making the system fairer; secondly, about directing more support to children; and thirdly, about encouraging work. Yes, it would be possible to go further in pursuit of all three principles, and I believe that, in the long term, we should do so, but this is a right first step in that direction.

Interestingly, many technical and practical issues have been raised tonight—primarily by the Liberal Democrats—but the debate has also revealed deep differences of principle between the Government and the Opposition. I am astonished that the Conservatives so strongly oppose not only the Bill, but the additional £1.5 billion for low-income families. I qualify that by saying that I assume that that is still their position, because a U-turn seemed to be taking place at the Dispatch Box earlier this afternoon. *[Interruption.]* Perhaps the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) or the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) would like to qualify that. Unfortunately, they are obviously not prepared to state their exact position on that additional £1.5 billion. That seems to be the critical issue at stake.

Mr. Gibb: Does the hon. Lady accept that much of that £1.5 billion will be wasted because it is spread way up the income scale, to people on £28,000, £30,000 or £35,000—even people on 38,000? Does she accept that point?

Yvette Cooper: No, I do not accept that point. Undoubtedly, most of that additional money will go to low-income families in the bottom two deciles of the income distribution. A few families higher in the income scale will get additional money because they have child care costs. If a family on £38,000 have five children needing child care, good luck to them—they will probably need the help. However, there are very few of those families, and the real additional help is being concentrated in the pockets of low-income families.

It is interesting that the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton obviously objects to additional child care help for those families on £28,000. I shall return to that subject later.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Yvette Cooper: I shall give way later; I want to make progress first.

A family in my constituency approached me about their financial situation, and I wrote to the Paymaster General about it. The couple are working more than 60 hours a week between them, and they told me that they reckoned

[Yvette Cooper]

that they were about a tenner better off in work than they would have been on benefit. That is not fair, and it is not a good incentive for the couple to stay in those jobs.

I received the following answer from my hon. Friend the present Paymaster General. With the minimum wage, and with the working families tax credit combined with the child care tax credit—because the couple have one child in part-time child care—the family's existing income of £228 per week after tax will increase to £263 per week. That is an increase of £35 per week—a 15 per cent. increase. Effectively, the Conservative Opposition, by opposing the Bill and saying that they want to abolish that additional spending, are saying that they want a 15 per cent. increase in that family's tax bill. They want to present that family with a huge tax bombshell, instead of giving them the help which I think that they need.

It tells us a lot about the Conservative party that, throughout the passage of the Bill that became the Finance Act 1998, the Conservatives tried to block any closure of tax loopholes—which, effectively, are tax breaks for the rich—and yet they are determined to block tax breaks for low-income families.

The working families tax credit has two main functions—to support children and to support work. Measures to support children, increase their well-being and get them out of poverty have often acted as disincentives to work. Equally, measures to try to help people into work have penalised families and pushed them further into poverty. The important thing about the working families tax credit is that it targets both measures.

I believe that the help that the working families tax credit will give low-income families—especially children—to get them out of poverty should be sufficient reason to support the Bill, and to support the extra £1.5 billion that will go into that tax credit. Thirty-two per cent. of children grow up in poverty, in households on less than half the average income; that means less than about £185 a week for a couple with two children. However, childhood poverty is even more damaging.

We should take into account not only the number of children in poverty today, but the impact that that poverty will have throughout those children's lives. Research by Paul Gregg and Steve Machin shows that the children of families who face financial difficulties are far more likely to leave school early, to end up in crime, to have contact with the police and to be less healthy throughout their lives. The legacy of that poverty will linger. We have an obligation to tackle poverty now, not only because of the situation today, but because of the inter-generational inequalities that will persist for decades. Therefore, raising the income of so many families by, on average, £17 per week makes a difference. It will improve children's health, and adults' health in 10 or 20 years' time.

The second aim of the working families tax credit is to support work. That matters, partly because the greatest cause of poverty among children is unemployment among their parents. That gives us a strong reason to help parents into jobs—not only so that they can set a good example for their children, but so that they can bring more money into the household.

We have had a few contributions about the lack of evidence on work incentives, and whether raising people's income by giving tax credits will make a difference to work incentives and encourage more people into work. I understand that the Institute for Fiscal Studies, in soon-to-be-published work—mentioned by the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb)—suggests that between 30,000 and 40,000 more women will be encouraged into the work force as a result of the working families tax credit. I believe that the IFS simply considered the impact on women, especially lone parents, but I understand that a success rate like that would have the added bonus of saving about 15 per cent. of the extra costs of implementing the working families tax credit.

However, that estimate is conservative compared with those that result from other academic work. I have not read that piece of research yet, but I understand that it has some econometric limitations, which would make it not as reliable—

Mr. Gibb: Perhaps I may help the hon. Lady. The IFS says that, on its estimates, only between 30,000 and 45,000 individuals will enter work as a result of the measure. It is costing £1.5 billion to put 45,000 people into work; that is £33,000 a job. Does she consider that that is taxpayer's money well spent?

Yvette Cooper: I have argued from the start that this measure is primarily about helping children, but that it has the added bonus of creating work incentives. The IFS estimate is very conservative, so I do not accept those figures as they stand.

Mr. Webb: The hon. Lady has made a powerful case for spending the money, and for supporting children. I presume that the IFS model takes into account only lone parents, which is where the plus 40,000 figure comes from. I presume that the IFS has not considered woman second earners who are married. Does she accept that, almost certainly, the marginal effect of the tax credit on all those who are currently receiving it will be to reduce their work incentives?

Yvette Cooper: I do not know whether the IFS has included second earners. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that it would be easier not to. I believe that the impact on second earners is unclear because of the child care tax credit. There has never been any modelling of the impact of that type of child care tax credit, and that type of child care help—for which those second earners would be eligible if they went out to work. There is a complete lack of information on the subject.

I do not want to spend too much time on the IFS report, because I do not consider that it has made the most reliable estimate. The most reliable work, which I mentioned earlier, was done by a very well-thought-of economist called David Card, on an experiment in Canada. It was research not on the Canadian system, but on a specific experiment with lone parents. Half the group, assigned randomly, were entitled to a credit of a similar value to the working families tax credit; the rest were not. The two groups were compared to see what the impact on their employment would be. That is probably the most reliable economic assessment under current circumstances, compared with all the other studies that have been carried out.

It was found that the employment rate doubled among those eligible for the additional help. That represents a huge impact. Among the people who were not eligible for the extra help, the rate was 12 per cent. Among those who were eligible for the extra help, it was 25 per cent. That is a massive increase in the proportion choosing to go into work as a result of the measure. We should be pleased about that, but it is an added bonus. We should remember that the main purpose of the measure is to get money into low-income families and help to support children. The strength of the proposal is that it would achieve both objectives. It would not either help children or provide an incentive for work; it would do both—a double whammy, effectively, increasing the labour supply—

Mr. Pickles: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. She is making an interesting speech and my remarks are not meant to trip her up. She has been forthright about what would constitute a success. The figure of 40,000 clearly would not be—that is regarded as a conservative estimate. In a year or two, when the measure has had an opportunity to bed in, how many people would have to be brought back into the labour market in order for it to be regarded as a success?

Yvette Cooper: I do not think that we can specify a figure. The working families tax credit will be a success if it simply manages to get an extra £17 a week, on average, into the pockets of low-income families. I would regard that as a success, because it is so important to help the children living in poverty and the families who are struggling to support them.

Miss Kirkbride: Family credit does that.

Yvette Cooper: It is interesting that Conservative Members are calling from a sedentary position for those families to be given family credit. Will any of those hon. Members stand up and say that they want an extra £1.5 billion to be spent on that? There are two key elements to the measure. One is the extra money—the extra generosity—to help low-income families. The other is the change in the structure of the tax and benefit system to encourage people into work. Conservative Members clearly do not support that. None of them has stood up.

There is a further important element, if the proposal is to work, which has been touched on by other hon. Members. There is a fear that money will be given away and swallowed up by employers, because they will cut wages. Working families tax credit would not work without a minimum wage. I do not believe that family credit could ever be substantially extended or expanded without a minimum wage. How could people be convinced that taxpayers' money would be spent efficiently, unless there were a floor on wages and on what employers could do in response to in-work benefits? Without a minimum wage, there would be no bottom line.

Opposition Members should be honest about their own arguments and their apparent concerns. They should recognise the strength of the case for introducing a minimum wage. That would allow in-work support, in the form of the working families tax credit, to act as a work incentive, to encourage more people into work and to get more money into the pockets of low-income families.

The Conservatives are trapped in a ludicrous ideological corner on the issue. Do they want the extra £1.5 billion to be spent on working families? Their motion states that they will oppose the Bill

"because it will increase the costs of social security . . . and . . . increase benefit dependency".

Cost seems to be a factor for them. They seem reluctant to spend the extra £1.5 billion—presumably, they want to cut it.

The hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) has said previously that the Conservatives would cut the working families tax credit. I did not understand the comments of the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar at the Dispatch Box. He seemed to be all over the place. Would he cut the £1.5 billion extra spending on the working families tax credit or not? A simple answer, yes or no, would help to clarify the position for the House and for my constituents, who want to know whether they will have to pay an extra £35 a week at the next election.

Those are important questions, but the Conservatives are prevaricating. They are not sure what they want to do about the £1.5 billion. The last we heard—

Mr. Pickles: The hon. Lady was no doubt present for the Prime Minister's speech to the parliamentary Labour party at Church house on 7 May 1997. When he said that he would reduce social security bills, did she heckle him?

Yvette Cooper: The aim of effective welfare reform is to cut the spending on the bills of failure, for which the Government that the hon. Gentleman supported were responsible for so long. It is tragic that they spent money keeping people trapped on benefit, rather than providing proper incentives to get those people into work.

The Conservatives do not know what they want to do about the £1.5 billion or the working families tax credit. Their leader said relatively recently that he wants to spend £5 billion on a transferable married couples tax allowance. Perhaps that proposal has now been quietly dropped and the £5 billion has disappeared, unexplained, along with the £1.5 billion.

Mr. Paterson *rose—*

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

Yvette Cooper: Alternatively, perhaps there has been another U-turn on the £5 billion transferable married couples tax allowance.

Mr. Bercow: I am sorry to trouble the hon. Lady. The speech made by her right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on 7 May 1997 was explicit. He said that there should be

"far-reaching reforms that will tackle insecurity and poverty, as well as reducing social security bills".

Does the hon. Lady understand? There was no reference to the bills of economic and social failure. The Prime Minister called specifically for a reduction in social security bills. The Government's measure will increase those bills. Why did she not condemn and heckle him at the time, as she should have done?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Gentleman is desperate to think of something to say, because his party has no answer to the question of what it would do about the Bill, and

[Yvette Cooper]

whether £1.5 billion should be put into the hands of low-income families. I believe that that would be a worthwhile use of Government money.

Do Conservative Members think that the £5 billion transferable married couples tax allowance proposed by the Leader of the Opposition is a worthwhile use of money, when it would presumably put extra cash into the hands of Greg and Carla, the couple of strangers who married yesterday, having only just met? The people who would lose from the Opposition proposals are families who do not have enough income to keep going and to keep their children out of poverty.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): The answer to the hon. Lady's original question is yes. I, like most Conservative Members, strongly support our leader's commitment to that policy. However, the hon. Lady is wrong about two of the details that she has given. The cost would not be as much as £5 billion, and she knows perfectly well that the couple to whom she referred would not be eligible for the allowance, as they are not supporting children or disabled relatives.

Yvette Cooper: In that case, what does the hon. Gentleman believe that the benefit would cost? Where would his party get the money, given that it already thinks that the Government's spending plans are "reckless", according to the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), the Opposition Treasury spokesman?

The Conservative Opposition do not have a position on the working families tax credit, nor do they know what to do to tackle poverty or help families on low incomes. It is sad that they cannot come up with more intelligent alternatives.

However, the Liberal Democrats have come up with sensible points that are worth discussing in detail. Their main point is that they consider the measure to be inefficient. I disagree. The focus on efficiency stems from a view that the system must be pure and simple, and target one problem purely and efficiently. That is an academic economist's approach. In fact, the Bill has two separate aims, and it is not possible to achieve both with complete efficiency. It is not possible to produce a perfectly efficient system helping to tackle child poverty, which also provides work incentives. The Bill will do both those things.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Lorna Fitzsimons) advanced a credible argument about the benefits for women. We are not talking just about the huge benefits for women who are lone parents or main breadwinners; they will clearly benefit.

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): The hon. Lady, whose remarks have been entertaining us, will know that the system that we are discussing will not allow a woman in a two-parent single-earner family to claim the child care allowance. A similar system in the United States led to family breakdowns and the non-declaration of "couple relationships". What evidence has the hon. Lady to demonstrate that the American experience will not be duplicated here?

Yvette Cooper: The American and Canadian systems have been raised repeatedly throughout the debate, but I think that, in many ways, they are not comparable to the system that we are proposing. Many of the problems inherent in both those systems have already been incorporated in the British arrangements for dealing with benefits and income tax.

The benefits for women that the Bill will provide will not only have a huge impact on women's incomes, but give them flexibility when they choose whether or not to work. Conservative Members are very foolish if they want to spend the next three years campaigning against help with child care for women who desperately want to work, and who want to be able to choose to work. The Bill will make a huge difference. It will not just help people in the short term, assisting them to find employment and secure a better future; it will tackle inter-generational problems. It will help those people's children during the next 10 years, and the next 20 years.

That is why I think that working families tax credit is so important. I wish that the Conservatives would get their act together, and would realise what a benefit it will be for low-income families.

7.3 pm

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): I shall not attempt to follow what was said by the hon. Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). I shall merely say that, although nearly every hon. Member would support the aims that she espouses, she seems to be seriously confused about how to achieve them. Perhaps the best example of her confusion was to be found in her closing remarks: she observed that we should not draw parallels with the American and Canadian experience only five minutes after stressing that the best work had been done in a Canadian experiment. What she said was entirely inconsistent.

I say in all humility, because I do not intend to make an especially party political speech, that as I listened to the Paymaster General's opening speech my mind was taken back to a time in 1988, just after my election, when, listening to proposals for the sweeping changes that we made shortly afterwards, I was convinced. A small number of very intelligent voices were raised from the Back Benches on both sides, making criticisms that struck me as arcane in the extreme. I particularly remember the voice of Sir Brandon Rhys Williams on our side, and that of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) on the Labour side. Within two or three years, I had decided that what we had done in 1988 had been profoundly mistaken, and that the lone voices had been right.

I am sorry to say that I think that, far from reversing those mistakes, the Government are going down exactly the same path. They are making the same mistakes, while including far more people in them. I believe that the cost, in terms of both social misery and expense to the taxpayer, will be horrendous. The Paymaster General spoke of helping people into jobs, reforming the tax and benefits system and rewarding work; she referred to the problem that those in work can currently earn little more than those not in work, to ceilings on earnings through the various tapers and to increasing thresholds. Above all, several Labour Members have mentioned targeting. That is exactly the language that we heard 10 years ago.

I have five arguments against the measure. Several of them apply to earlier measures, but each one shows that the outcome of this Bill will be worse than the outcome

of the provisions that it will replace. Let me begin with the effect of pulling more people into the means-testing traps. The Government estimate that an extra 400,000 people will be involved, but I believe that the number will be much greater.

We have heard the quibbling objection that the working families tax credit is a tax relief rather than a benefit. I personally support the idea of focusing on tax reliefs, not benefits. I strongly support the commitment of the Leader of the Opposition to a policy for which those of us in the Conservative family campaign have argued for a decade, favouring transferable tax allowances for families containing one earner supporting another who is caring either for children, or for an elderly or disabled relative. I also support child tax allowances.

The objection that was raised all those years ago to such universal allowances—an objection that is now being raised by Labour Members—does not focus enough on what matters. Ultimately, we all have the same objectives in this regard, although that does not apply to issues that I shall raise later. The problem is that, in attempting to focus on low earners, the Government are doing exactly what we tried to do in 1988, on a smaller scale: they are trying to push money towards people, and then withdraw it on a taper.

As a number of speakers—including the right hon. Member for Birkenhead—have observed, the catch is that the result will be a taper that is much higher than the going rate of income tax, which overlaps with a number of other tapers. Housing benefit is one of the most obvious examples. We heard a good deal of rhetoric earlier about people in work finding that they are earning little more as the taper goes up. That is exactly what will happen in this instance, but with a difference: more people will be involved and there will be more cost to the taxpayer.

That brings me to my second objection, which relates to complexity. There is a rather odd point here. Superficially, the proposed measure may appear simpler than the existing arrangements. The objection of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead, Sir Brandon Rhys Williams and others was based on the absurdity of a system under which people who were paying tax were also receiving means-tested benefits, which resulted not only in disincentives but in considerable cost.

It might be thought that the fact that both the tax and the working families tax credit will be handled by the same organisation would make the system simpler. Far from it. The problem comes when we hit the real world. I happen to have a couple of direct windows into these matters: my father owns and runs a small business, and my wife works part time for another. In the real world, fewer and fewer people earn the same each week. Not only does money go up and down because of overtime, it is heavily affected by bonuses, which are sometimes paid weeks or months in arrears.

For a short time, I worked for a business in which bonuses were calculated each week, but were paid a couple of weeks in arrears. As everyone knows—or should know—such arrangements have landed DSS offices with a complicated family credit problem. We are taking the administration away from a series of local offices that have learnt to cope with it and dumping it on to our small businesses. Few people believe in privatisation more strongly than I do, but this is a privatisation too far. Asking struggling small businesses employing a handful of people to take on such an administrative nightmare—week after week after week—is too much.

That, I understand, is one of the major reasons why the Canadians, following a groundswell of public pressure, are abandoning their system after five years, which brings me to my third argument.

Mr. Ruffley: Fraud.

Mr. Brazier: Inevitably, my third argument is fraud, as my hon. Friend has guessed.

Hand in hand with the problems of complexity tend to go those of fraud, for exactly the reason that was so articulately discussed by my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight). As he rightly said—and as the Social Security Committee, under the chairmanship of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead, said in the previous Parliament—most people who get involved in fraud do not deliberately aim to cheat the tax system or the benefits system. They become involved because they find the system too complicated. They are asked a lot of questions and would lose a lot of money if they answered honestly, so they get sucked further and further down the slippery slope.

The proposed system will prove even more complicated than the previous system, will involve an even larger number of people and will—incredibly and for the first time—bring employers into asking employees about their capital holdings. The scope for increased fraud and complexity is very much greater than under the old system.

That brings me to my fourth objection. All my hon. Friends who have spoken have said that the measure is an attack on the traditional family. I ask the House to think about that for a moment. There will be an impact on the traditional family. Whether mothers will be allowed to register as carers or not is a grey area. I fear that the answer will be no, although we do not know because that is dealt with in one of the Henry VIII clauses. If they are allowed to do so, the measure will become incredibly expensive. If they are not, here will be another Government policy that subsidises child care while doing nothing at all for low-income families in which one parent is caring for small children.

Most of us would accept that hon. Members on both sides of the House are trying to bring their own views and experiences to the debate but, of all the remarks that have been made, the one I most resented was made by the hon. Member for Gravesham (Mr. Pond). He intervened on my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) to challenge him about people earning £38,000 gaining from the measure, and asked how many families have five children.

Let me put on the record, because the hon. Gentleman is not in the Chamber, the story of a family with five children who visited my surgery on Saturday. Two of those children are by a previous marriage, and they were severely mistreated by the previous husband. The present husband, who does two extra jobs and works a seven-day week, is struggling to bring money in for his family, including the two daughters by the previous marriage. His income is at such a level that the difference that the measure will make to him can be measured in pence.

[Mr. Brazier]

I wish that I could share with the House the resentment that my constituent feels about the people who are, as he sees it, sponging off the existing system. They will now receive considerable extra sums as a result of the measure. I do not know whether we can call the measure family friendly, because the word "family" seems to mean different things to different people, but it is deeply unfriendly to marriage.

My fifth and final point relates to cost. People talk as though the extra cost—£1.5 billion—is a relatively small sum, and Labour Members have suggested that we are being petty because we are concerned about the way in which the money is being spent. Of course we are concerned. The biggest single cost arising from the benefits system—the biggest single driver—is the cost arising from the dynamics of the system. Sir Brandon Rhys Williams was the first to make the distinction between the dynamic model and the static model for the benefits system, and the right hon. Member for Birkenhead and others have since run with that distinction.

There is a difference between a dynamic model—a system based on genuine incentives, not only to work, but for married couples to stay together and to raise children—and a static model focusing on existing need. I leave this thought with the House: the rhetoric with which the Paymaster General began the debate could have been lifted word for word from the announcement on benefit changes made by the Conservative Government in 1988.

The difference is—*[Interruption.]* Had the Paymaster General been present earlier in my speech, she would have heard me give six examples from the speech made from the Government Front Bench at that time. Whatever her commitment, and whatever she may claim, this measure is going in the same wrong direction as the 1988 measure, but embraces a much larger number of people.

The Paymaster General and a series of Back Benchers have embraced the measure enthusiastically, although the Canadians have had to abandon their system after five years. I say to new Members of the House that I bitterly regret supporting those measures in 1988. I believe that, within a year or two, they will come to regret supporting these measures.

7.17 pm

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in a debate on what will be considered to be one of the Government's radical, reforming welfare measures. We have had an interesting and constructive debate. I disagree with many of the views expressed by Conservative Members. In particular, I do not agree with the conclusions reached by the hon. Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier), although I acknowledge a number of the pressures that he identified. We must address them, and I hope to deal with some in my speech.

I am not speaking as a great expert on social security, but I have drawn on the experiences of my constituents, who will be a touchstone for the measure, as they are for so many other Government policies. My constituents are by and large on relatively low incomes, although they would not regard themselves as poor. Average incomes are between £15,600 and £16,400, so many of them will draw some benefits from the range of measures in the Bill.

Many women in my constituency work, although perhaps not full time, and their incomes are important in providing a reasonable life style for their families. They are very pro-family, and we need to make people absolutely sure that these policies are about supporting families and enabling people to give their families the kind of life style that they want, in the way that they want. I share my constituents' views on that.

There are many family breakdowns in my constituency, because of the current pressures on families. Cases concerning families with five children from two different partnerships are common. Many of the women who come to my advice surgeries ask about the ways in which they can go back to work and reorganise their lives after the breakdown of their relationship with their partner.

I am sure that the Bill will be welcomed by my constituents, including families on low income, who want family earnings to be topped up in some way so that they can enjoy a better lifestyle. It will certainly be welcomed by single parents; I have already seen much evidence of that.

The Bill will be welcomed by other people who want the welfare state to be reformed. The point was picked up by my hon. Friend the Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). The Bill will be, and will be seen to be, an important measure to reform the welfare state, because one of the most important reforms that we can achieve is to get people off benefits and into work so that they can be financially independent. Many of my constituents would be prepared to pay quite a high start-up cost, because they know that, in the end, there will be a saving to them, and that the burden of taxes that they pay will be lower. I assure hon. Members that that issue comes up frequently on the doorstep.

The working families tax credit will—although perhaps not in itself, because there is the extra cost of the £1.5 billion—be an important way of breaking the cycle and getting people back into work: it will make work pay for many more people on low earnings. In doing that, it will ensure that more people, once they get off benefits and into work, stay in work and leave the revolving door that takes many people out of low pay on to benefits and back on to low pay. That will be a huge benefit for all concerned.

The working families tax credit will ensure that people feel that, when they go into work, they will not have to go through the social security system—a humiliating system to have to negotiate—to claim benefits and top up their pay packet. The Bill will end that stigma.

I understand the point about the need for confidentiality at work so that the employer does not go blabbing around the workplace about what different employees are getting from them and what they are getting from the welfare state. I understand that, because many of my male constituents have told me how aggrieved they are when their employers start chatting about who is paying what to the Child Support Agency. I am sure that that can be dealt with. The employer will not gain confidential information from the application form in the same way that, the minute a letter from the Child Support Agency comes winging through the employer's letterbox, he finds out that one of his employees is in trouble with an ex-partner.

The Bill will be warmly welcomed because it is profoundly pro-women. That is important. We have looked at some of the figures. Half of family credit claimants—this has been mentioned often this evening—are single parents and almost all of those will be women. The working families tax credit deals in particular with some of the real barriers that have stopped women, especially single women with children, from going back to work, and it will encourage many more women to come off benefits and go into work.

I profoundly disagree with the people who say that the Bill moves money from the purse to the wallet. It will provide liberating benefits for many women because of the child care tax credit. For the first time, as far as I know—and I have two young children and have to pay an enormous amount in child care costs—a Government have recognised how much it costs to have children properly looked after, and have made some reasonable allowance for that, which women will recognise reflects the real costs of child care.

The Bill provides flexibility. That is important, too—particularly in my constituency, because many women in my constituency do shift work. They work at places that have 24-hour operations: call centres, retail places, packing and distribution companies and so on. They need to be able to get child care that operates at different times and can suit their working hours.

Let me pick up some of the points that hon. Members have made about whether parents can pay granny to look after a child. The Government are right to have certain restrictions on who can be paid child care costs. I confess that I have forgotten some of the details of the restrictions, but the Government are right to limit the measure to people who are properly qualified and registered, and to premises that are properly registered.

It is important that, if the Government pay money for something, they insist on quality. Given the panics and scares about low-quality child care and the fact that the Government, through the Department for Education and Employment, are trying to drive up child care standards, it is important that we insist on those same standards if money is being paid to someone to do the purchasing themselves. If we were paying the money to a local authority, we would insist that they buy to standard. If we pay to an individual person, the same rules have to apply.

Some ask, "Why cannot an auntie be a child minder?" If she goes through all the requirements that are needed to register and gets the premises inspected, I assume that she can be a child minder and operate as a child minder would, but it is right for the Government not to pretend that family care and professional child care are the same thing. There will always be a difference between people who decide that they want a family member to provide family care for their child and people who want to have a professional child minder, professional nursemaid or whoever to look after their child.

Anyone who has had to make arrangements for child care—the child might be looked after in a child minder's place for a while, then picked up by a family relative or friend and taken elsewhere—knows that there are differences in the type of care that is provided. It is right to reflect those differences in the way in which we pay benefits to parents.

Mr. Flight: While I understand the logic of what the hon. Lady is saying, does she not feel that that is a somewhat elitist view in that, in many communities, people are used to their children being looked after by the extended family and their neighbours, many of whom may be just as good at looking after children as a qualified professional? I fear that, if the measure is confined to qualified professionals, it will be satisfactory for graduate women who have careers, but it will not help people who are less well qualified and who are used to a different sort of child care.

Ms Keeble: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me a bit of breathing space. Those are difficult issues, but, in many communities, particularly in new towns—and half my constituency is a new town, where many women work because, by and large, new towns grew up with that ethos—many people do not have extended families, so we are dealing with different communities. Some people may find that, with the hours they work, it is not convenient for a family member to look after their child.

The other factor—it comes back to the point that I made earlier—is that, by putting enough money into the child care tax credit, the Government are giving women a choice. The choice is not just a financial one; it is also about the type of care. It is important that women have that choice. I do not think that it is elitist to say that they can choose between an auntie and a child minder. The sort of money that the Government are putting into the scheme makes a child minder a realistic possibility and will probably mean that the child minder is paid more than the current rate, because some of the pay rates that child minders get are abysmal. One has only to work it out. Many women are paid under £4 an hour, so if they have to pay a child minder, the child minder will receive still less. The Government are doing the right thing in respect of the financial arrangements.

There are many issues concerning standards and quality and how much the state should intervene in family care—for example if an auntie looks after the children. I have spoken to women in my constituency who are deeply concerned about early-years care. They spend a great deal of time discussing the matter and, although they have not reached any firm conclusions, they definitely want a choice. Finance is a big barrier to choice, and the Bill addresses that.

Even if they have had jobs previously, many women returning to work have to accept very low pay. The working families tax credit recognises that problem and provides better tapering. Many women returning to work assume that they will receive benefit for a while, but are concerned that when their income increases they will disappear off the radar screen, lose their benefits and be back where they started. The improved tapering will therefore prove significant.

The Bill clearly puts an end to the link between single parenthood and welfare dependency. My right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), who made an interesting and stimulating speech, referred to that, and I agree with much of what he said. The Employment Service presented a roadshow in Northampton promoting to single parents the benefits of the new deal. It distributed leaflets about in-work benefits and had some early discussions about working families tax credit. Women were extremely interested in the information and have responded positively to all the measures. Women with partners in work pass on the information to friends who are single parents.

[Ms Keeble]

The working families tax credit will also benefit women who are second-income earners in families on low incomes who cannot afford child care costs.

I also welcome the disabled persons tax credit, which has not been discussed very much this evening. It will provide proper support for disabled people who work. In my constituency, a factory called Nordis Industries which makes soap and other products for major retailers has encountered problems with grants that were frozen by the previous Government—and I admit that the freeze was extended by the present Government. The disabled persons tax credit will help to restore the earnings of some employees at that factory. I very much welcome that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Pontefract and Castleford said that the Bill would help children. The main causes of child poverty include having a lone parent or a disabled parent.

The Bill includes some of the key principles of Labour's proposals for welfare reform, and I welcome that. That is certainly one reason why the measure is popular in my constituency and elsewhere. The Tories turned the welfare state into a latter-day opium of the masses. It lulled people into accepting a completely unacceptable lot by giving them just enough money to get by, but not enough to do anything or to try and change their lives.

Much has been said about the Tories' plans for the working families tax credit at the next election. One has only to look at their track record—particularly in respect of supporting single parents. Like many Labour Members, I saw employment training schemes for lone parents being shut down because of the lack of money, and whole generations of families in inner cities relying on the welfare state. I am pleased that the Government are determined to break that pattern so that the welfare state becomes a solution instead of being part of the problem. We shall make sure that the welfare state promotes the work ethic, supports families, encourages initiative, promotes social and financial mobility, supports aspirations and gives people a real opportunity to put their lives in order and provide for themselves and their families.

The Bill also integrates the tax and benefits system—a policy that could be taken further. Much has been made, particularly by the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb), of the fact that it does not include measures in respect of home ownership. I have two comments about that. First, my constituents who come to see me about problems with home ownership have mortgage difficulties because of their income levels. Many of those difficulties will be addressed in the Financial Services and Markets Bill, which will provide greater protection for home buyers and those with mortgages. Secondly, for many people on low incomes, the problems of home ownership involve not only mortgage repayments, but the capital costs of maintaining a property.

During the 1980s when the Conservatives were in government, the then Department of the Environment carried out a major study on the costs of inner-city home ownership; sadly, it was never published. It showed that home ownership was a financial burden on people on the lowest incomes. They could not afford to maintain their homes so the capital value of an important capital asset would decline. Home ownership is much more complicated than the hon. Member for Northavon acknowledged.

The main principle of the working families tax credit recognises and removes the barriers to work. The Bill also has to be viewed in context. Many of those who have criticised the measure tonight have considered it in isolation, when it should be looked at in conjunction with the national minimum wage and the new deal programme, as a total package to get people into work, to make sure that work pays and to remove incentives to move out of work.

I believe that, in future, the working families tax credit will be seen as a great breakthrough for the welfare state. It will bring huge benefits to many families in my constituency who are on low or not very generous incomes. It will be a liberating force for many women and I am pleased to support it.

7.38 pm

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): I begin by adding my welcome to the two hon. Ladies on the Government Front Bench. Let me say to the Paymaster General that I shall miss our annual bouts on smuggling and bootlegging tobacco and alcohol, but I welcome the Financial Secretary to a similar fate. Before moving on, I mildly observe that capable as both hon. Ladies and my hon. Friends on the Opposition Front Bench are, it is sad that the debate on a Bill that was advertised as crucial to the Government policy has not been graced by the presence of either the Chancellor of the Exchequer or the Secretary of State for Social Security. Their presence would have reinforced to the public that the Government take the issue seriously. The Opposition take it seriously, and we have had a wide-ranging and interesting debate. I agree with the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) and other hon. Friends who have spoken. Rather than reiterate them, there are a number of specific issues to which I wish to refer.

The right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) said that, primarily, the measure was designed to help lone parents. All of us know that under the heading of "lone parents" we lump together those who are widowed or divorced, and those who have never had a stable relationship.

My hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) and the hon. Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble) referred to the Child Support Agency. Given the complexity of the human relationships thrown up by the case work of the agency, I wonder whether we will have to deal with exactly the same sort of problems in relation to the working families tax credit in our surgeries. Mothers and fathers might argue about how many days they care for the child over the week, or, because one parent with care looks after the child for 240 days and the other for 110, about whether the benefits should be split between them. That would be an administrative nightmare—on top of the administrative nightmare that we are predicting. That may be a Committee point, but it would be useful to know whether the Government have even begun to think about it.

The Bill also aims to encourage two working parents, but it penalises one-earner couples. My concern is that low-income families with two or three children under the

age of five, and with a mother at home who is not working, will not get the child care tax allowance. I understand the theory that the mother should be looking after the children all the time. However, it has been apparent to many of us for many years that even when a mother is at home looking after children, those children can benefit from nursery school. Children in low-income, one-earner families will not be able to benefit from pre-school education, other than the rising fives.

Ms Buck: I am slightly confused by the hon. Lady's point. The provision of pre-school places, such as by the Pre-School Learning Alliance—those places are virtually free; there is a nominal charge—is widely available to parents. Such provision took something of a hammering under the previous Government as a result of the nursery vouchers scheme, but it is now witnessing a resurgence. There has been a significant expansion in places for three and four-year-olds in the state nursery sector. I am confused by the idea that there is no free or affordable child care for children under five.

Mrs. Lait: That is most interesting. On the one hand, the hon. Lady argues for not having a child care allowance for children under five because the care provision exists and is free. On the other, she is suggesting that one-earner, low-income couples should not be able to benefit from other forms of child care. The hon. Member for Northampton, North spent a lot of time saying that women need choice. That is what we should provide for them. The Government have not done so.

As a member of the Conservative party, I may not think that widespread and generous tax allowances are the best way to help people back into work, or to provide for children. However, we must get some logic into the scheme, and that is what is missing. I am not recommending one thing or the other. I am merely asking the Government to think about that exclusion of low-income, one-earner couples.

Ms Keeble: Does the hon. Lady accept that a couple with a child, with the woman at home, will shortly have the choice—if the child is over three—of putting the child into a nursery? However, the other option of a child minder would not normally be taken, because a child minder normally provides child care at home—which, if the mother is staying at home, she would do herself. The choices offered by the Government are perfectly realistic in both cases.

Mrs. Lait: I am very glad to hear that, and I hope that that proves to be true in practice. I would imagine that a mother with three children under the age of five—and one over the age of three—will still have the problem of getting the other two properly ready for school. That is the result of pre-school education. We must make sure that the Government have thought this through properly.

I accept that this is a tax credit and not a benefit, but there is an increased dependency on state provision because of the terms of the credit. The Government have said that they want to get away from the dependency culture. The Conservatives have long wanted to do that, but the working families tax credit increases the number of people who are dependent on the state.

In the long run, those people who are not dependent on the state will find that they become resentful of the number of people for whom they are paying through their taxes. We must remember that this is not Government money—it is taxpayers' money, which comes from companies and individuals to pay for other people. Eventually, if the burden becomes too great, we could have a taxpayers' revolt, as in the late 1970s.

The hon. Member for Northampton, North dwelt at great length on the issue of child minders—another point that may well come up in Committee. At present, there is confusion as to who can be a child minder. In the Social Security Select Committee, it became clear that the Inland Revenue believes that it is possible for relatives or friends to become registered child minders. I do not have a problem with that, and I suspect that we shall see a growth in the number of registered child minders. However, there is a gap in the provision of care for children between the ages of eight and 14.

If both parents are at work and there are no after-school clubs, we will have latchkey kids, and all of the problems that go with that. Will the Government amend the Children Act 1989, so that registered child minding can go up to the age of 14, or 16 if the child has a disability? Are the Government going to insist that every child between the ages of eight and 14 is looked after in something like a kids' club? What would happen if the child did not want to go to such a club?

My mother was widowed when I was 12, and I used to come home to a house where sometimes there was somebody there, and sometimes not. I must say that I preferred it when no one was there—that suited me down to the ground. That was the choice of a child and, under the provisions of the Children Act, we must give children choices.

I wish to ask about au pairs, because au pairs are being hit badly by the national minimum wage rules and regulations. The Government are saying that au pairs are employees and are not there on an educational basis. Under the terms of the working families tax credit taper, some couples who employ au pairs may be eligible for the working families tax credit and child care allowance. The au pair currently does not necessarily get paid the national minimum wage and is not a registered child minder, but could well be the person providing child care for eight to 14-year-olds.

If we increase the number of registered child minders, local authorities will incur registration and inspection costs. If we ask employers to take on the burden of distributing the working families tax credit—leaving aside the question of who will know what—there will be increased costs for the public sector, which employs nurses, teachers and others. What provision have the Government made to ensure that the public sector does not have to try desperately to find the funds to administer the system?

We need some answers. We have had a very wide debate, and I have added some more aspects to it. I hope that the Government will have considered all the issues by the time that the Bill goes to Committee. The questions need to be teased out and answered, otherwise the chaos that I am sure will attend the birth of the credit will be worsened.

7.52 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North): I warmly welcome the introduction of the working families tax credit, which I see as an integral part of the

[Ms Karen Buck]

strategy to make work pay. It is the third leg of the stool of the minimum wage and welfare to work. I am pleased that it has also been warmly endorsed by organisations with a wealth of experience and knowledge of issues concerning poverty and low pay.

The National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux, which daily deals with thousands of people who are trying to calculate whether they would be better off going back to work, has welcomed the proposals. It said that the

"introduction of the Tax Credits will mean considerably greater resources being directed to boosting the earnings of groups in low paid work."

The Child Poverty Action Group said:

"In conjunction with the minimum wage, the working families tax credit will make a substantial difference to families in low paid work."

Those organisations have not hesitated—and, I am sure, will not hesitate—to criticise the Government if they feel that resources are not being directed in the best possible way to assist people on low incomes.

I apologise for the fact that I was out of the Chamber for an hour and missed some of the contributions, but I was more than a little disappointed with what I heard from some Opposition Members. I was especially disappointed at the lack of willingness to recognise the additional incentive that will be introduced by making payments through the wage packet.

That incentive has been casually dismissed by many, although the hon. Members for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) and for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) recognised that the proposal offers a tax credit and not a means-tested benefit. That is what distinguishes it from the family credit system, and there is a profound psychological difference. There is a real prospect of people being able to supplement their incomes without having to go into the social security system. That is the central raison d'etre of the Bill.

It is absolutely impossible to estimate what the impact will be, but common sense dictates—and we know from speaking to people in our surgeries and elsewhere—that people do not like going into the means-tested social security system if that can be avoided. In particular, they want to be able to work without having to do that.

Opposition Members asked why we should not simply build on the family credit system, ignoring the fact that that system is by no means perfect, not only for the reasons that I have outlined but because family credit is taken up by only 76 per cent. of those who are eligible, although about four fifths of the money available is claimed. The system cannot be held up as unimprovable.

Opposition Members made something of a meal of the wallet-purse issue. It is to the Government's great credit that they listened to the strong arguments of various organisations, including the ones that I mentioned earlier, and of members of the Social Security Committee, who considered the proposal in great detail. The Government listened to the initial concern, that the working families tax credit would automatically go into the pocket of the earner, and choice has been introduced into the system. The large majority of claimants of family credit, who are likely to claim the working families tax credit, will be unaffected by the proposal.

Mr. Pickles: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way and, especially, for her questioning in the Select Committee, which was useful on this point. If there is a dispute between partners as to who should get the money, who ultimately should decide?

Ms Buck: Personally, as in the Select Committee, I favour the default option. As far as I remember—I may be proved wrong—Opposition Members on the Select Committee accused Labour Members of making heavy weather of the proposal, effectively saying that we were accusing men of being difficult and playing down the fact that, in the majority of families, it is perfectly possible to come to an amicable agreement over the division of resources; but in fact we pressed for and achieved a significant recognition of the wallet-purse issue. I, along with the Child Poverty Action Group, which dealt with the matter in the briefing that it published in response to the working families tax credit, am largely reassured that the issue will not be a great problem, although I do not consider the system absolutely perfect.

Mr. Webb: The hon. Lady stressed the psychological benefits of payment through the pay packet and said that means-tested benefits carry a stigma. Why, then, would any woman in a couple choose the means-tested option?

Ms Buck: Families on low incomes may make the decision that it helps them with budgeting; others may not feel that they need to organise their budgets in that way. It is perfectly possible for people to opt for either method, and we are giving them a choice.

In my remaining remarks I will deal with the operation of the child care tax credit, which is the flagship of working families tax credit. It has been said that child care costs are the single most significant barrier to single parents entering the workplace and I agree. Although having said that, housing costs are probably running a pretty close second in London and it is important that the Government deal with housing benefit later.

A large number of single parents live in my constituency and I have made it a priority to talk to parents in nurseries and play groups and to their representative organisations. There is no question that child care costs are the principal barrier. Women and single parents want to get back into the workplace. First and foremost, they want to do so through education and training so that they get not so much a job as a career. The availability and cost of child care is the most significant barrier that they face.

The child care tax proposals set out by the Government exceeded my wildest expectations. They are very generous and an innovative, and radical response to that most serious barrier to work. The child care tax credit will replace the child care disregard within family credit, which was paid to only 40,000 families throughout Britain—it took a rocket scientist to understand that system and two rocket scientists to explain how it operated. The Chancellor was right to give it a short-term boost in the first few months of this Government as an indicator of our support in dealing with child care, but we have rightly and properly moved swiftly on after only 19 months in government to replace it as part of the review of tax credits.

Child care costs vary dramatically throughout the country, but in London it is not uncommon for child minders to cost £120 a week and for nursery places to

cost £170. I do not begrudge child minders a single penny—a child minder is the principal source of my child care—because they are grossly underpaid for the demanding job that we expect of them. However the costs, particularly in London and the south-east, make child care a pipe dream for the overwhelming majority of parents.

Another aspect of the Bill that is pleasing—and here I am picking up on some of the comments of the hon. Member for Beckenham—is that the operation of the child care tax credit will deal with another significant worry, which is the quality of child care. Much child care is undertaken not merely by mums and grandmums—thank God it is, and wonderful it is too—but in other wider and more informal networks of friends. To all intents and purposes those people are doing the job of child minding, but they are doing it without the benefits of registration and inspection, or of being connected into the education and social services networks that provide support mechanisms, drop-in facilities, education, and the national voluntary qualification in child care, which helps to lever up standards.

I hope and expect the child care tax credit to encourage a significant proportion of unregistered child minders to register. That will be good news all round. It will raise the income of women who are unregistered child minders, which is a good thing, and encourage registration, also a good thing. The hon. Member for Beckenham mentioned the pressure on local authorities because of the additional costs that might accrue from such registration. That is a reasonable argument and it deserves to be tackled. However, the chronic shortage of registered child minders is one of the most serious problems facing local authorities. Those with statutory child care responsibilities need a supply of child minders to help them with the daytime care of children who are being assisted under the Children Act 1989. It is a chronic problem and it leads to additional costs. The Bill will also help local authorities out of that bind.

I envisage the money that will be made available through the child care tax credit—I am evangelising with this message in my local community—being used not only to encourage women to register, but to provide the opportunity for them to come together to organise child minder support groups and drop-in facilities, which are woefully inadequate. Child minding is an isolating job at times and people need support. I also envisage the resources that will become available to groups of parents being used to help to finance after-school facilities and homework clubs.

The Government have made a welcome commitment to the extension of after-school clubs through the sixth good cause of the lottery. Evidence of that is now all around us. However, that will not be enough, for example in isolated rural communities where, under present circumstances, it will be impossible for every village primary school to have an after-school club. The measure will provide an opportunity for parents to band together.

The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, which is not known for its radical support of Government initiatives on such matters, is holding fire on its nursery proposals in the expectation that opportunities will arise out of the implementation of the working families tax credit, which will allow it to revamp and restructure its nursery and after-school facilities. That is a welcome development indeed.

There is an opportunity for a virtuous circle here and for the £200 million or so—I am greedy for more of a good thing, but I will take it for what it is at the moment—to start to cascade down to some of our poor communities and estates.

Mr. Gibb: The Institute for Fiscal Studies states that if many more people register as child minders, which is what the hon. Lady says that she wants to happen, the £200 million could escalate to £1 billion, £2 billion or even up to £4 billion. Does she accept that figure?

Ms Buck: I do not. The figure is based on the assumption that everyone who provides any sort of child care will register, which is fanciful. That will not happen, primarily because there is no reason why relatives who care for their children and grandchildren should be brought into the scheme. It is most unlikely that that will be the case.

Mr. Gibb: The hon. Lady said that she wanted more informal child minders to register. Those registrations would not have been taken into account by the Government when they calculated the £200 million cost. Therefore, she must envisage that her hopes are that the scheme will cost significantly more than that. How much does she envisage her hopes costing the Government?

Ms Buck: As I am sure the hon. Gentleman knows, there is a paucity of information on both current provision and the likely demand for child care. Therefore, it is fanciful to put a figure on it. Again, it is to the Government's credit that the Department for Education and Employment has made money available to local authorities so that they can carry out the first serious audit of child care requirements. The £200 million is a significant increase on the family credit child care disregard, which was payable to 40,000 families—I cannot remember the exact figure for that. The increase is certainly welcome and it will create huge additional opportunities.

Two other issues are worthy of attention and flow from the report of the Social Security Select Committee. First, and in this instance I share the opinions of the hon. Member for Beckenham, the application of the child care tax credit must continually be reviewed to find out to whom it applies. I share with my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble) the belief that one cannot use the child care tax credit to pay for unregistered child care. It would be wholly inappropriate for public money to be spent to support child care if there were no guarantee as to the quality, the basic soundness of the premises and so forth and to safety. I have not the slightest doubt that the moment that something unfortunate happened to a child in care that was partly paid for through the working families tax credit we would all pay dearly for it. Clearly, registration must be the bedrock. The reliance on after-school clubs, child minders and other categories of care currently registered under the Children Act 1989 does not necessarily reflect the realities of today's labour market.

My hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, North talked about her constituency experience of the sort of jobs that are becoming available. I can echo that from my experience of the inner city. The jobs that are becoming available, especially to younger women entering the job

[Ms Buck]

market, are not amenable to the nine-to-three or nine-to-five working day. That is not always a bad thing because it can fit parental preferences. I am talking about service-driven, 24-hour jobs such as those with the Heathrow express coming up at Paddington, call centres, supermarkets and The Gap in Covent Garden. It is not reasonable to make the child care tax credit available only for care provided outside the home.

Even if child care is available and the parent desperately wants to take a good job, the option will collapse if the only care available means that the parent has to ferry a seven-year-old about at 9 pm. No parent wants to do that. Similarly, people do not want to have to shuffle children from a homework club—perhaps in another school—to a child minder and then to some other care. The Government must revisit the idea of making the child care tax credit available for care in a person's home. There is no easy solution, but I hope that the Government will give godspeed to the private Member's Bill on registration of nannies and consider the matter when that becomes law.

The second issue, which is dear to my heart, that I draw to the Minister's attention from the Social Security Committee's report is free school dinners. The National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux report on the working families tax credit noted that most people entering work have unrealistic expectations of how much better off they will be. In a citizens advice bureau or benefits office, they get a better calculation and we start to break through the problem. When people consider applying for a job or look at adverts or the job centre, they do calculations in their heads that do not work out. I am supported by several organisations that deal with such issues in saying that free school dinners are central to the problem. A parent with two children in a school finds that the bill can add up to £11 or £12 a week. It is a real barrier.

In practice, once people are in work they are likely to be significantly better off and to start to increase their earnings, so school dinners become less significant. The Social Security Committee recommended that free school dinners should at least be rolled over for the period of the initial claim for working families tax credit. It comes back to psychology, which is not to be underestimated. Such a provision would provide a cushion of security for claimants whom we want to enter the workplace because of the advantages of self-esteem and earning potential that it will give them but who are put off by a barrier in their heads.

Many important points were addressed by the Social Security Committee in our three reports over nearly two years. The Government have listened and responded to many of them. Other concerns were raised tonight. I do not accept all of them but many are serious, specific issues that concern the implementation of the tax credit. However, the key fact is that, taken with the minimum wage and the welfare-to-work package, this is a comprehensive, well thought out, radical proposal to make work pay. For the first time, we are showing people who are in very low paid work or considering entering the workplace that we have a comprehensive strategy to be on their side, to help them and to exchange benefit dependence for the dignity of work.

8.15 pm

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): I congratulate the hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) on her excellent speech. I apologise for not being in my place for the whole of it, but I had a meeting with the Minister for Local Government and Housing to discuss the standing spending assessment grant for North Yorkshire.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) on his excellent speech moving the Opposition amendment. I especially agree with the part that refers to the Bill leading to increased business costs while undermining family structures. It would be ungracious of me not to congratulate the Financial Secretary on her well-deserved promotion. I trust that we have not lost the hard bargain that we struck on the Agenda 2000 deal for North Yorkshire; I hope that her successor will hold to it. I congratulate the Paymaster General in her absence. There will soon be only ladies at the Treasury; we shall watch this space.

I have problems with the tax credit scheme, which is bad for business and a poor deal for electors, contrary to what many Labour Members said. It is particularly bad news for the traditional family unit as we know it. Its effect on business will be negative, even though we heard that the proposals may be revised following the thorough Social Security Committee report, which I welcome.

The tax credit is negative in approach and will be difficult to administer. Small businesses in particular will be burdened by extra administration. The Confederation of British Industry is on record as firmly believing that all employees should have the option to receive credits directly from the Inland Revenue. Speaking up for employees, I think that flexibility for them is important. Many single parents may wish to continue to receive payment through the Inland Revenue for reasons of confidentiality. In that respect, I pay tribute to the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight).

Continued payment through the Inland Revenue would avoid the perception of being on benefits, which carries a particularly negative social connotation. It would also cover temporary workers and employees with more than one employer. I shall return to that momentarily. I think that the Government have closed down that option. Perhaps the Financial Secretary will surprise me by saying that they are minded to reopen it. I make a personal plea to her to consider allowing employees to continue the option of being paid directly from the Inland Revenue and not, as the Government propose, through their employer in their pay cheques.

The administration of the working families tax credit will hit small firms especially hard. A huge raft of extra administration is involved, and small firms will inevitably suffer from the cash-flow problems mentioned earlier. I understand that the Government may not have considered the point that in the vast majority of cases, the amount of credit will exceed the tax liability of the claimant. Will they will give that some thought, because that it will impose a heavy administrative burden on employers?

The Paymaster General has said that the Inland Revenue intends to put employers in funds when requested. I still argue that the administrative burden on

smaller employers of paying credit up front and having to claim funds from the Inland Revenue in advance will be a significant burden that many cannot meet. It is not fair to ask small firms to meet that extra responsibility. Will the Financial Secretary consider exempting smaller firms from the requirement to administer the credit through the pay packet? Perhaps employees of very small companies should have their benefit administered by the Revenue. I wonder whether the Financial Secretary can satisfy me that the Government have not yet considered such an exemption, but may be minded to agree to it now that I have given them the opportunity to consider it this evening.

I mentioned low-paid workers in multiple employment. Individuals may have several employers paying their salary. Which employer will be asked to pay the credit and whose decision will it be? I have not so far heard an answer to that question. It is not a hypothetical question; it is a concrete question.

The Government have paid lip service to helping small businesses and reducing the administrative burden on them. I appreciate that the Government look to small businesses, as the previous Government did, to create jobs. Small businesses are perhaps the most positive generators of new jobs, so this is the most extraordinary time for the Government to introduce an extremely complex working families tax credit scheme, which will clobber small businesses and put an unacceptable burden on them.

I argue that the Government intend to use employers as unpaid tax collectors and will inevitably impose an even greater burden on small businesses. Perhaps we can pause for a moment and consider the already lengthy list of statutory schemes imposed on businesses. Income tax, national insurance contributions and VAT, and benefits such as statutory sick pay, maternity pay, paternity pay—I am not sure whether that has been introduced yet—and redundancy pay have to be funded by employers. The Financial Secretary can imagine the impact on small businesses of adding to that impressive and growing list the working families tax credit, especially on small and sole-employer businesses. It is an unacceptable burden to ask them to take on at this time.

I would go further and say that the scheme gives entirely the wrong message to the business community. The Government are asking it to create jobs and to act as an unpaid tax collector. I echo the comments made by my hon. Friends in saying that it would be more appropriate to leave the administration of support for families with the Government, as it is now through the Department of Social Security, and not, via the back door, to use the good offices of already hard-pressed employers.

The relationship between an employer and an employee is extremely finely balanced. If the working families tax credit is introduced in the way that we have heard this evening, employers may even be accused of invading the personal and private life of an employee—not by their choice, but because they are required to do so by statute. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs, fellow employees may be able to link into the computer system and find out not only what other employees earn, but what tax credits they receive. Employees may be offended and the employer could be placed in an embarrassing situation. The scheme could also lead to ill feeling on the part of an employee should an administrative error occur. The complicated nature of the tax credit and the manner in which the Government expect the employer to administer it on behalf of the Government mean that the potential for administrative error, in my humble judgment, is huge.

The Paymaster General said that there was a choice to be made by the Government and, by implication, by the Opposition, between being business friendly and being family friendly. I put it to the House that the Government have failed on both counts. It comes as a great sadness to me that the Government have wasted an opportunity in the Bill. It is neither family friendly nor business friendly. For the reasons that I have given, it is positively unfriendly and unhelpful to business.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): My hon. Friend has been eloquent in examining the Bill's unfriendliness to business. Is she satisfied at the prospect that the Bill will impose a means-tested benefit, with all the corrosive effects that that may have, on people earning incomes up to £37,000? Is she satisfied that the Bill is fair to two-parent families with only one earner?

Miss McIntosh: My hon. Friend can obviously read my mind. I was coming to the specific question of two-parent families with a single earner. As for means-testing up to £37,000, I have a hazy recollection of figures in the early morning—or not so early morning as the Paymaster General said—interview on the "Today" programme this morning. The Paymaster General did not refute the figures. If my memory is correct, in a study undertaken by Alan Duncan of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, it was said that not many jobs would be created by the tax credit scheme. On the institute's calculation, the cost of each job would be a staggering £40,000.

I was left with the impression that £40,000 would be the cost of each job and that not many jobs would be created. I was mildly surprised that the Paymaster General let that allegation go past without refuting it. Perhaps, like me, the Financial Secretary is having some difficulty finding that figure. I have read through the press release and the revised press release from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, and the evidence that it gave to the Select Committee, and I have to confess that I did not find that figure. However, that allegation was made this morning and was not refuted. That amount is an unacceptable cost to the taxpayer for no saving.

The hon. Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) alleged to my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar that the Conservatives were not in favour of increasing the bill by £1.5 billion. I had the impression that the Government were elected on the basis of a commitment to cut social security spending. I put it no higher than that I am left confused. Perhaps the Financial Secretary could answer that point. How a £1.5 billion increase in one measure can be interpreted as a cut leaves me in a state of confusion.

As my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) says, the Bill is not family friendly: the tax credit would penalise two-parent, single-earner families because, unlike lone parents, such families do not qualify for the child care tax credit. That is positive discrimination against two-parent, single-earner families and I wonder whether it was a deliberate omission on the part of the Government to exclude the nuclear family, in which one parent goes out to work while the other stays at home and takes responsibility for bringing up the next generation.

[Miss McIntosh]

The Bill is unfriendly to the traditional family, which I was brought up to cherish and which, I understand, the Prime Minister and his family also cherish; and it is unfriendly to small businesses. The Second Reading of the Bill is a real tragedy for the traditional family. It demonstrates the Government's unwillingness to support the structure of families, many of whose members are employed or employ others in small businesses.

Mr. Paterson: My hon. Friend has touched on a point that brings together both of her arguments. In America, many new businesses—small businesses, employing fewer than five people—have been created by families. The Bill, by imposing time-consuming extra regulation on hard-pressed entrepreneurs, will hit both families and businesses in this country.

Miss McIntosh: I shall have to ask my hon. Friend to help me with my next speech. He has provided a positive argument which does indeed neatly bring together my two arguments. In North Yorkshire, 95 per cent. of businesses employ fewer than 25 employees, so any business employing more than that number qualifies as a large business in that area. The point is that the Government's tax credit policy will hit 95 per cent. of the businesses in North Yorkshire. I thank my hon. Friend for helping me with that argument. The Bill is a bad one and I shall vigorously oppose it on Second Reading.

8.30 pm

Ms Beverley Hughes (Stretford and Urmston): We have had a wide-ranging debate and many hon. Members on both sides of the House have made their points ably, from differing points of view. However, as this is a Second Reading debate and because many of the points made so far have dealt with hon. Members' views on the detailed implementation of the Bill, I intend to return to the starting point and to the principles that the Bill is designed to address.

My hon. Friend the Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) spoke eloquently about a serious problem that has persisted in this country for some time: the problem of children living in poverty. Children of low-income families suffer the long-term and multiple effects of relative social and economic deprivation. That has knock-on effects on their health, housing, aspirations and achievement. My hon. Friend made it clear that, if we are to address those fundamental problems and achieve a sustainable improvement in the condition of those families, we have to introduce radical measures. I agree, and that is my starting point.

The current welfare system as it relates to work and tax does not help families to improve their lot. Our income support systems trap such families in a culture of dependency. Our family credit and tax systems keep people earning low wages, because punitive tax rates and tapers ensure that they have to take a giant step in terms of additional income if they are substantially to improve their lot. It is important that we develop a radical approach to such problems and so crack the cycle of deprivation.

The only sustainable approach is to direct additional resources to the heart of those families and, simultaneously, to help them to establish a sustainable position in work over a long period. Those twin approaches are essential if we are to enable such families to achieve a sustainable improvement, with all the benefits in future years that such an improvement carries with it. The working families tax credit embodies those twin approaches and makes possible, albeit not inevitable, a sustainable improvement in the lot of some of the poorest people in our society.

We need a proposal that is based on certain principles and embodies certain characteristics. First, it needs to contain a minimum income guarantee which will give families the certainty that their income will not drop below a certain level as a result of the legislation.

Secondly—I have heard various views expressed on this point—we need also to link assistance with employment; in other words, to link the measure with the rewards that people get from work. We have discussed income a great deal, but it is not only income, important though that is, that people receive from work. Being in work changes people's life styles and aspirations and the way they feel about themselves. It enables them to develop an approach to life that emphasises moving forward and having routines and disciplines. All that has an impact not only on parents in work, but on their children.

Mr. Swayne: I entirely agree with the hon. Lady, but does she accept that concern about the Bill, certainly among Conservative Members, relates not so much to a minimum income guarantee, but to the fact that a means-tested benefit will be available to more families, up to and including those who are relatively well to do, which can only have a corrosive effect on society?

Ms Hughes: No, I do not share the hon. Gentleman's view. The mechanism for the delivery of the benefit as a tax credit rather than the current welfare benefit—which is separate from the wage packet and the world of work—will make a crucial difference to the way in which people perceive it. The stigma that many people feel is attached to receiving benefits will be significantly reduced, if not eradicated. That is an important element of the proposal.

The attempt in the Bill to inculcate a psychological change was one of the features that Martin Taylor specifically referred to when he reported on proposals to introduce a tax credit. He thought that it was important to have a tax credit system because

"it would associate the payment in the recipient's mind with the fact of working, a potentially valuable psychological change".

Hon. Members have commented on the relative paucity of research on the direct relationship between the psychological effect of a change in delivery of a benefit and an incentive to work, and I acknowledge that paucity. We are dealing with the unknown, but I suggest, particularly to Conservative Members, that it is common sense that a benefit that is firmly attached to the rewards of work is much more likely to provide an incentive to work by making work more rewarding than it is to have a neutral effect or to act as a disincentive.

Thirdly, we need a system that is more generous to families at the low end of the income scale than at present. We need an arrangement that enables them to keep more of their pay.

Fourthly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) clearly pointed out, we certainly need a much more generous and

effective measure for child care assistance than the child care disregard on family credit, which is particularly ineffective.

Fifthly, we need to give help to those already in work, but we need also to make work more worth while for those families who want to work. We need a child-centred approach which provides assistance directly to the heart of the family. Delivering help through the wage package does that.

Mr. Swayne: I thank the hon. Lady for showing me her customary courtesy in giving way a second time. Does she accept that the advantage to which she refers will be confined to single-parent families, and that the fact that the same help with child care costs will not be available to two-parent families in which only one parent works will at least give an impression of setting those families at a disadvantage?

Ms Hughes: I have listened carefully to the argument advanced by Conservative Members that the Bill goes against the traditional idea of the family. I have been bemused by it because, as far as I can assess from the detailed documents that I have read, the notion that the Bill will penalise families in which one parent stays at home to care for children is false. The Bill will be neutral in that respect.

Mr. Ruffley: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Hughes: I shall finish this point first. Under the working families tax credit system, the parents in a two-parent family who do not pay for child care because they choose to have one parent staying at home to provide that care will benefit, as the member of that couple who goes out to work and earns an income will be eligible for the adult credit and the child credits, but not for the child care credits. However, that will not be a penalty, as that couple will not be paying for child care.

In contrast, when both parents in a two-parent family work—and they usually do so for low incomes—they will get an additional credit to help with any child care for which they pay. However, that additional credit is worth only 70 per cent. of the cost of the care, so the argument that the scheme penalises one-parent working families is based on a false premise and is an incorrect analysis of the information that we have received so far.

Mr. Ruffley: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for letting me intervene in her interesting speech. She argues that the effect will be neutral, but the empirical evidence from America about systems such as the working families tax credit system does not support her. The American research shows that, when a two-parent family cannot take advantage of a child care allowance, the incentive is for them to break up to take advantage of the child care provisions for single parents. I should be interested to hear the hon. Lady's analysis of that evidence. If that is what happens in America, why should it not happen here?

Ms Hughes: I am not familiar with that research and so am not able to comment on its validity. Even if it is valid, I am not sure whether the conclusion can be transported to this country. However, I should be astonished if the hon. Gentleman were to contend that couples would break up their families and subject their children to the consequent trauma simply to get the relatively small amount of child care tax credit to which they may then become entitled. I find that extremely difficult to believe, but I shall certainly look at the research if the hon. Gentleman is willing to send it to me.

Miss Kirkbride: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, as this is an important matter. She compared a two-parent family in which both parents work, and which is thus eligible for child care credits, with one in which only one parent works. Although neither family will be very well off, the family in which only one parent works will have a lower income than the one in which both parents work and which is thereby eligible for child care tax credits. Given the Government's commitment to the two-parent family structure, how can that be fair?

Ms Hughes: As I explained earlier, the conclusion drawn by the hon. Lady depends on the way in which individual families' incomes pan out. When both parents in a two-parent family work, they are able to claim the child care tax credit because, by definition, they have to pay for child care. However, they will be reimbursed for those costs only up to a maximum of 70 per cent., and the second earner's wages will pay at least 30 per cent. of the total child care cost over and above the tax credit. So the extent to which such a couple might be better off than a family in which only one parent works, but which consequently does not pay for child care, is debatable. It would depend on the levels of income in the two families.

I was outlining the principles needed for a system to deal with the difficult problems I have mentioned. The final principle is to maintain an option of giving assistance directly to the woman.

Working families tax credit is the only system that fulfils all the criteria that I have laid out. We have heard arguments in support of family credit as the best way of delivering additional assistance to poor families, but family credit does not in fact deliver on many fronts. It does not guarantee a minimum income, it does not link measure with reward for work, it is not particularly child centred, and it carries, for lots of families, the stigma of many welfare benefits. On the criteria that are important in measuring effective delivery of help, working families tax credit delivers in a way that family credit does not, and tinkering with family credit would not make it deliver on those criteria.

We have heard much from Conservative Members about how working families tax credit will be an inefficient disaster—a complicated and bureaucratic system. *[Interruption.]* I am paraphrasing the views that I have heard, not giving my own. We ought to stick to our principles. The system will be complex; any system that delivers to hundreds of thousands of people will be complex. The change from the Department of Social Security to the Inland Revenue will also be complex.

However, the points made by Conservative Members are nothing more than speculation designed to fuel fear. It would be refreshing if Conservative Members would genuinely identify issues that they thought the Government should take into account, while still, because of the importance of the Bill, suggesting some constructive ways around problems. Instead, with the dead hand of opposition, they have retreated into saying, "No, we don't want it, and we won't support it."

Mr. Paterson: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, who has been generous in giving way throughout her speech.

[Mr. Paterson]

Does she believe that the life of an accountant or a personnel director in a little business will be made easier or more difficult by the Bill?

Ms Hughes: Clearly, the Bill asks business to undertake an additional job, but its impact on business has been grossly overstated, particularly by the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh). In practice, the Bill involves a small addition to what businesses do routinely.

In my discussions with Ministers, I have been impressed by the seriousness with which they take the development of the Bill and its implementation. They understand that no matter how good the principles of the Bill are, its effectiveness will be at least partly determined by the practicalities of its delivery. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to the Treasury will refer to implementation when she sums up the debate.

I have also been impressed by the way in which Ministers have attempted to bring business on board. My hon. Friend the Paymaster General referred to the code of practice being developed with business, which is a genuine attempt to deal in the most helpful and constructive way with the issues that we recognise will arise for small businesses. I must tell Conservative Members that I do not think it unreasonable as a general principle to expect business to be a partner with Government in trying to assist families in work, particularly those on low incomes. Business already acts in that way, as has been said, with income tax and other deliveries through the wage packet.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Lady sought to address my point, but has not entirely done so. She used the term "gross overstatement" about the prospective burden on business. Is she aware that the principal complainants on this score, in the first instance and all along over the past 12 months or so, have been the representative business organisations: the Federation of Small Businesses, the Confederation of British Industry and the Institute of Directors? It is very serious to accuse them of gross overstatement. I feel sure that she would not want to be guilty of any such offence.

Ms Hughes: As the hon. Gentleman knows, my reference to overstatement applied to the speech of the hon. Member for Vale of York. I am aware of the representations that have been made—certainly when the working families tax credit was first being considered—by the organisations that the hon. Gentleman identifies. I am also aware that those organisations have since been in dialogue with Ministers. That process will continue. I have every confidence that those organisations and their members will take this measure on board, because Ministers are committed to ensuring that it as successful and effective as possible for the families whom we are trying to help. That, of course, involves accommodating, as far as possible, the concerns of business. I have no doubt that my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary will want to refer to that.

Reference has been made to the view that, under the proposed system, not only would fraud be easier to perpetrate, but policing would be more difficult. My reading of the proposal is entirely at odds with that conclusion. Clause 8 sets out clearly the arrangements for dealing with fraud and the penalties incurred. That clearly demonstrates that, compared with the arrangements for family credit and many social security benefits, the tax regime will be more stringent. The scope of financial penalties will be extended, the burden of proof required before certain penalties are imposed will be lowered and, unlike other for social security benefits, it will be possible to impose a penalty, for example, for failing to provide information in relation to an application. Hon. Members who feel that the measure is more open to fraud and more difficult to police have misread and misunderstood the proposals.

I share concern about fraud. We must reduce it as far as we can in any system because money should go to the people for whom it is intended. Although I share such valid and serious concerns, I do not share the view that the system is inherently more open to fraud than the present system. As I have argued, it is less open to fraud and will be much more effectively policed when fraud is suspected.

I shall not go through all my points because others want to speak. This measure, taken together with the national minimum wage, the national child care strategy and child benefit increases for all families with children, will give more assistance to low-income families with children than has ever been provided as a package by any Government.

Conservative Members have made it clear not only that they would never have introduced such measures, but that they will resist them. I think that we have established that they will repeal the system if they ever get the chance. I am not quite sure about that, although the electorate will want to be clear. Unfortunately, the fact that the Tories have no interest in assisting those for whom the measure is designed will not be any surprise either to such people or to others. I hope that as many hon. Members as possible will support the measure because it is a radical and genuine attempt to deal with the serious issue of child poverty. For that reason alone, it should be supported.

8.55 pm

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): For my sins, I sit on the Social Security Select Committee. As my colleague, the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), said, we have looked into the issue of the working families tax credit three times, with a view to issuing three reports.

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): The hon. Lady was never there.

Miss Kirkbride: How would the hon. Gentleman know, when he is not a member of the Select Committee? If he wants to make such ignorant comments, perhaps he would like to go outside the Chamber and do so. However, he probably would be interested to know that, when the Select Committee discussed the subject of tax credits with witnesses, experts from both left and right roundly said—much to the chagrin of many Labour Members—what a very bad idea it was to introduce those tax credits. The matter has caused some concern among my Labour colleagues on the Select Committee, because it has been very difficult to find anyone who believes that it is a good idea.

Ms Buck: I take it that the hon. Lady was not in the Chamber when I spoke, because I read out the very warm

welcomes that were given to the working families tax credit by organisations such as the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux and the Child Poverty Action Group, which are the organisations with the most knowledge and experience of dealing with issues of low pay and poverty.

Miss Kirkbride: All I can say is that, as far as I can recall, when I was sitting in the Select Committee—and I have attended all the sittings at which evidence was given—none of those groups said that the tax credit was a good idea. In fact, on the left of the debate there has been huge concern about purse-versus-wallet issues—a concern which I believe that the hon. Lady rather sympathised with, as I think was mentioned in earlier debates. Of course, coming from the right, there was massive concern among various business organisations as to the impact of the tax credits on the way businesses operate. It was difficult to gainsay any of the points that those business organisations raised, and I feel that, so far in this debate, they have not been gainsaid by Labour Members.

I pay sincere and heartfelt tribute to the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb), whose critique, revealing what is so terribly wrong with the working families tax credit, was exceptionally accurate and very good. All the running on these issues has been made on the difficulties that have been presented by the introduction of the working families tax credit. However strong our desire to help poor families, we should be aware that this is not the way to do so. Tonight Conservative Members have explained—giving many reasons—why that is the case. We sincerely hope that the Government listen before it is too late.

How did the Government get themselves into this position? Curiously, when they came to power they said that they would cut social security bills. The measure before us is not a cut in the social security bill; it is an increase of £1.5 billion, and rapidly rising.

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Miss Kirkbride: Let me finish the point. The Government said that they would cut social security bills; if we use their flawed methods of accounting—if they are good enough for the health service, they are good enough for the social security budget—over the next three years they intend to increase the social security budget by nigh on £40 billion. On that point, I would love to give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Coaker: If we reduce tax allowances for poorer people, would that be increased welfare spending? In a sense, a tax credit is like a tax allowance. *[Interruption.]*

Miss Kirkbride: I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) for pointing out the answer to that question. That would be a tax cut. In my view, it would be much better to increase the value of tax allowances. That would help many more people in the ways that Labour Members have said is their intention by introducing the working families tax credit. That would be a much better, much simpler way to proceed. It would avoid all the difficulties presented by the working families tax credit. I would be keen for my party to increase the value of tax allowances when we return to government.

Ms Keeble: Can the hon. Lady explain how a change in the tax allowance would help people who are just going into work, and how it would deal with a child care tax credit, as the working families tax credit will?

Miss Kirkbride: I hope the hon. Lady will forgive me for saying that the answer to her question is obvious. She does not need me to answer it. If people going out to work on extremely low wages are not paying tax, that is a considerable benefit to them. Under the system that the Government are reinforcing, people on low wages pay tax, but reclaim it in what used to be called a benefit, and is now called a tax credit.

We all want to help low-paid families. It is in the interest of society, children, families and individuals that more people go out to work to earn their own living. We should encourage that, but the measure is not the way forward.

The Paymaster General is not at her Bench. Like other hon. Members, I listened to her interview this morning. *[Interruption.]* I would not have been so uncharitable in my remarks, had I not been prompted by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley). The Paymaster General said—100 times over, it seemed to me in my semi-dormant state—that she wanted to make work pay. Of course, family credit does that.

I criticise the interviewer, Mr. James Naughtie, who does not always point out facts that are glaringly obvious to those on the Conservative Benches. He never pointed out to the Paymaster General that the Government seek to make work pay by introducing the working families tax credit, when the existing system of family credit does precisely that.

That is the difficulty that the Government face. Family credit is designed to top up low wages. We have already heard how it works, that there is a high take-up relative to other benefits, and that there is assumed to be little fraud in the system, although there is some. Labour Members have not made the case for abolishing that and introducing a new system. It is the Government's prerogative to make the system more generous—

Ms Beverley Hughes: Does the hon. Lady believe that family credit creates sufficient links between work and benefit for it to provide an incentive to work and satisfy some of the objectives that she listed?

Miss Kirkbride: Labour Members have not explained why more people will want to go out to work if they are claiming a tax credit, rather than a benefit. There is no real evidence to suggest that that is the case. The Institute for Fiscal Studies states that a very small number of people might be enticed back to work as a result—40,000, as against 1.3 million whom the Government expect to claim working families tax credit. It will serve as an incentive to only 40,000 extra people, who will want to go out to work because it will be called a tax credit, rather than a benefit.

Ms Hughes: I do not know whether the hon. Lady has any experience of claiming benefit, but perhaps she can

[Ms Hughes]

imagine it. If she had a choice between completing a tax return and sending it to the Inland Revenue to claim her tax allowances, or claiming them from another agency and receiving them as a cheque, which would she prefer? *[Interruption.]*

Miss Kirkbride: As my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton points out, claimants will still be dealing with the Benefits Agency. They will not fill in a tax return, like those who are not eligible to claim the credit. The Benefits Agency will need to check their circumstances to prevent fraudulent claims.

If the hon. Lady suggests otherwise, there will be massive fraud because the benefit will not be properly policed. Those on the Treasury Benches have insisted that the same entry system, the same gateposts and the same guard against fraud will be introduced in the new system as are to be found in the current system. I do not accept that the two are substantially different.

Although many families who claim family credit may be poorer than other families, they are perfectly capable of working out for themselves whether they will be better off. Where the money comes from does not matter to them; they want to know whether they will ultimately be better off, and whether they are certain to be paid. Earlier exchanges have made it clear that they will have no such certainty, because the money will be handed to employers, some of whom may be unscrupulous.

Mr. Bercow: As the family credit system is clearly working so well, does my hon. Friend not agree that the Government would have been well advised to follow the dictum of Lord Falkland, who said, "That which it is not necessary to change, it is necessary not to change"?

Miss Kirkbride: Your eloquence bears testimony to the strength of the point that you have raised. Undoubtedly, no case for change has been made—and we are contemplating an enormous change. Labour Members underestimate the flak that will fly when small employers realise what you are asking them to do. You are all living in cloud cuckoo land. When I talk to employers—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. Some difficulties are creeping in on both sides of the House. Hon. Members must bear in mind that they are addressing the Chair, and that they should refer to other hon. Members in the third person.

Miss Kirkbride: I sincerely apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am afraid that I was a little carried away by the exchanges—perhaps because I am giving way too often, and feeling that I am having a conversation rather than addressing the Chair.

Labour Members have not made a case for the proposed change. It was suggested earlier that the increase in take-up would amount to some 400,000, but that is because the benefit is being made more generous. The number of new claimants will be very limited. I do not believe that the new system will make a difference: as long as the money comes from some source, the fact of its being a tax credit rather than a benefit is unlikely to change attitudes to any great extent.

The point raised by Labour Members about the stigma is very dubious. I began to make this point earlier, but as I was intervening on another speech I could not develop it as much as I would have liked. Under the present system, people dealing with the Benefits Agency can apply for family credit anonymously. No one—not the next-door neighbour, or the employer—need know that they are claiming a benefit. Surely the present system imposes the least possible stigma.

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge): As my hon. Friend may know, I have some experience as an employer in a small business. Many valid objections to working families tax credit have been advanced, but one factor that concerns many small and medium-sized businesses is the lack of privacy—the fact that employers will be forced to look into their employees' private affairs. What effect does my hon. Friend expect that aspect to have on employer-employee relationships?

Miss Kirkbride: My hon. Friend will know the answer better than I, but I think that Conservative Members consider that human nature is such that, if an employer has to know that one of his employees is claiming a credit such as this, the employee concerned will consider it a much greater stigma.

Ms Buck: The hon. Lady is painting a romantic picture of family credit, as hon. Members have done throughout the debate. Does not the Benefits Agency regularly, and on an enormous scale, contact employers to seek verification of employment details, especially in the small-business, low-income sector? The idea that most employers are in the dark about their employees' claims is nonsense.

Miss Kirkbride: The difficulty with the hon. Lady's point is that to whatever extent that is true at the moment—we know not—it will be true of every employee and employer in the country as a result of the changes that the Government are introducing. There is no way around that, so I caution the Government about stigma and about the idea that the working families tax credit is better than the original system. That could blow up in their face, because people on lower wages will be deeply embarrassed that their employers—and, inevitably, their work colleagues—have to know the circumstances of their employment.

The House will forgive me for raising a point that has already been discussed, but I have to correct some of my hon. Friends. It has been suggested that we are increasing welfare dependency—I would agree that we are—by pushing up the income scale the level at which people will be eligible for the working families tax credit. It has been suggested that people might earn £37,000 a year and still be eligible for the working families tax credit, but I draw attention to remarks made by the Paymaster General, who said that

"the highest possible level of family income which will be supplemented by the WFTC depends on the number, and age, of the children in the family. For example, if the family had five children under 11 rather than two, it would still receive some WFTC with family income of . . . £38,000."—[*Official Report*, 21 July 1998; Vol. 316, c. *502*.]

The level is even higher than some of my hon. Friends suggested. In my view, it is wrong that we are encouraging a welfare system that extends so far up the income scale.

I find it particularly surprising that the new Labour Government should want to proceed in such a way, when we share the aim of focusing whatever money we have to spend on disadvantaged groups. How can we suggest that a family earning £38,000 a year—well above the level at which it would pay the top rate of tax—is in any way disadvantaged and should be eligible for a tax credit designed for poorer families?

We should go further. A lot has been said about the unfairness to two-parent families where one parent is left at home to look after the children while the other goes out to work. I do not accept that Labour Members really appreciate how angry many people up and down the country will be when they focus on what Parliament is doing.

We all know that, at this stage, we are the only ones discussing the measure. The majority of people outside have not focused on it and will not know what we have done until the day arrives when it is law and they have to accept the consequences. Two-parent families that want mum to stay at home and dad to go out to work will realise that they are getting no help from the Government, even though they earn less than the family next door which is eligible for more help from the Government, whether through benefits or tax credits.

The fact that a family in a certain segment of society can be helped because of the lifestyle it has chosen—whereas a similar family earning less will receive less help from the Government—will cause deep distress and deep anger. It will rebound in the Government's face when people realise that the legislation will have such an impact.

Ms Keeble: That is a ridiculous argument. If women stay at home to look after their children, they do so because that is their preferred choice. I know that, because I have children. Women certainly do not expect to be paid to stay at home to look after their children. Most women, including many in my constituency, work part time because they have to—they need the money—and the real problem is the fact that they cannot afford the child care that they need. To put this issue up as the politics of envy is complete nonsense. The whole argument is about supporting families, supporting children and giving women choice.

Miss Kirkbride: The hon. Lady's intervention demonstrates the case of Conservative Members, who are trying to point out to the Government that the Bill will be a source of great anger and concern to families who have chosen to stay at home because it does not help them. It is encapsulated in her intervention that she does not understand how aggrieved those people will feel that they should not be eligible for help, while other families, who will have a right to choose how they want to run their lives, will be eligible for Government help. Again, it is one of the unfortunate aspects of the way in which the Government are going forward.

I turn to the biggest difficulty with the Government's proposals. Again, we will see what behavioural effects there will be, but I suspect that they will be deeply shocking to the Government. It is perhaps why we have not seen detailed clauses on the child care tax credit arrangements. The Treasury is worried about what an open-ended commitment those tax credits might be.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has suggested that, far from the Government's modest estimate being correct—I think that it is a few hundred million; I cannot quite remember—the cost could end up being closer to £4 billion. It is obvious how that might happen.

The Government's proposal could mean that two young women living next door to each other, both with families and both not working, could end up looking after each other's children, rather than their own, becoming employed, and becoming eligible for the minimum wage and family credit that the Government propose. An extraordinary volume of public spending could go into such arrangements, whereas now women look after their own children, or their mothers look after them. At the moment, the taxpayer does not pay for that, but under the Government' proposals the bill will be picked up by the taxpayer.

Ms Buck: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Miss Kirkbride: I am being told that I should move on a little more quickly, so the hon. Lady will forgive me if I do not give way. I am sure that we can further discuss the difficulties of the Government's proposals in the Select Committee on Social Security.

The difficulties in relation to the business element have been ably explained by all my colleagues. I agree with the Confederation of British Industry that the Government should consider removing small firms from the arrangements. If that cannot happen, perhaps the Minister will consider giving compensation to small firms for administering the new arrangements. I urge the Government to consider the matter. On that point, I end my remarks.

9.18 pm

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): Two minutes is scarcely enough time to do justice to the Bill.

I think that we would all agree that one of the most humbling things about being a Member of Parliament is when people come to us in our surgeries. Two months ago, a young woman came to my surgery. As she walked through the door, I distinctly recall thinking, "What can possibly be her problem?" She looked self-assured and confident, yet, within 30 seconds of sitting down, she had burst into tears.

That young woman explained that she had two children, she had been a nurse and now had no prospect of getting back into employment. Quite simply, the costs of the travel that she would have to undertake to get to the jobs that she had looked at were so prohibitive that going back to work would make her worse off, and there was no way in which she could get child care for her children and still make work pay.

Critically, the Bill will change that young woman's situation and that of 1 million other families throughout the country, so that work becomes not simply a possibility for those people, but something that they will embrace; it is, after all, what they want to do. Women with children do not necessarily stay at home because they do not want to work. Some of them would be poorer if they went to work because of the cost of child care. I congratulate the Government on introducing such an imaginative scheme to redress that.

[Mr. Barry Gardiner]

The Opposition amendment suggests that the Bill will increase benefit dependency, but it will encourage people out of benefit and into work. It is essential that the remuneration for that work and should be delivered in the pay packet, together with the benefit.

9.20 pm

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): We have had a revealing debate on a deeply flawed, ill-thought-through and partially completed Bill, legislating for a deeply flawed, ill-thought-through and partially completed policy. A pattern seems to be emerging in which the Government take a highly successful policy from the previous Government and tinker with it. They add a bit of new Labour and a bit of egalitarianism and, hey presto, the policy is in a complete mess. They replaced personal equity plans and tax-exempt special savings accounts, which were very popular savings schemes, with the inadequate and flawed individual savings accounts or ISAs. Now they propose to abolish family credit, an in-work benefit that has helped and encouraged hundreds of thousands of people on low incomes to remain in work.

Little stigma is attached to claiming family credit, and 767,000 families receive it. That amounts to a 72 per cent. take-up rate by case load and an 84 per cent. take-up rate by expenditure. An in-work benefit with minimal stigma which can be claimed without one's neighbours, employer or work colleagues knowing is being replaced by one which, in respect of a working lone parent, will require the employer, the finance director and the payroll clerk to know that he or she is claiming a benefit.

Just under half of all employees in Britain work for firms employing fewer than 50 people and 99 per cent. of all businesses employ fewer than 50 people. The Federation of Small Businesses stated in evidence to the Select Committee that, as a result of working families tax credit,

"there could be the added stigma of being an employee who receives, and knowingly receives, benefit within the workplace."

Ministers have very little experience of life in the real world of business, but those are real concerns. The hon. Member for Coventry, North-East (Mr. Ainsworth), the Government Whip, laughs but, through their naivety and ignorance, the Government have devised a system that will increase stigma and not reduce it. If the Minister is so convinced that the working families tax credit will not increase stigma, will she tell the House what her target, expectation or hope is for its take-up rate? Will it be lower than the take-up rate for family credit, which is 84 per cent., or will it be higher? I hope that she will address those points in her reply. If she expects it to be higher, what percentage does she expect it to achieve?

The issue goes to the heart of the debate because the take-up rate of benefits is evidence of whether people feel a stigma in claiming it. Family credit, with an 84 per cent. take-up rate, is evidence of very little stigma. The risk of embarrassment by colleagues discovering that one is claiming working families tax credit could well reduce take-up.

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Gentleman clearly prefers family credit to working families tax credit. Does that mean that he prefers families to be, on average, £17 a week worse off? Alternatively, does he want to spend £1.5 billion making family credit more generous? Which is it?

Mr. Gibb: The hon. Lady churns out the same old soundbites. The £1.5 billion will be wasted by spending the money right up the income scale. By the time that we get back into government, the Labour party will have spent that £1.5 billion—and many multiples of it.

Mrs. Roche: If the hon. Gentleman's party were fortunate enough to win the next general election, would he abolish that extra £17 a week?

Mr. Gibb: The £1.5 billion that the Government keep talking about will have been spent. This is a bad Bill—it will not work. It will leave the incoming Government with a complete mess, and it will be up to the incoming Conservative Government to clean it up—as we will have to clean up every other mess that the Government will leave.

I should like the Minister to give a clear figure of what she expects the take-up rate for the working families tax credit to be. Many lone parents who are struggling to hold down a job and bring up a family could be put in a deeply embarrassing position at work because of the Bill and the Government. That is why the Bill is deeply flawed.

The right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), in a thoughtful speech—as one would expect from him—raised concerns about the increased power that the Bill gives to the employers of the low paid. He talked about the difficulties that may arise if the employee loses his or her job. Despite the best intentions, the reality will be that there will be delays in the Inland Revenue re-routing payments, whereas, under the existing family credit system, there are no such problems because payments are made direct to the household.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to the real likelihood of fraud in the system. He cited the United States and the earned income tax credit, where 15 per cent. of payments are lost to fraud. He is right to say that it is absurd to design into a system the likelihood of fraud, instead of trying to design it out.

In an excellent speech, the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) said that all the reforms to tapers and the quantity of benefits could have been made to the existing family credit system. The only distinctive part of the working families tax credit is that it is paid through the tax system and the payroll, and that is where the problems of stigma and vulnerability will arise. He was right to point out the real administrative problems that will arise following changed circumstances, and the intrusive nature of having to discuss changed circumstances—such as the wife leaving the household—with an employer. None of those problems arises under the existing family credit system.

The hon. Member for Rochdale (Lorna Fitzsimons) said that the working families tax credit targets money to women in cases of difficult relationships. How can she know what will happen when there is a dispute over who should receive the working families tax credit? We have tried to extract the information from the Minister, but we have received nothing. Perhaps the hon. Lady has heard something that we have not.

My hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight), a member of the Select Committee, pointed out that the measure will be a disaster in practice. Individuals will have to go to the Revenue to sort out problems, and companies will have to apply to the Revenue for advances when they pay out more in tax credits than they retain in PAYE or national insurance. That is cumbersome and bureaucratic.

My hon. Friend also pointed out the likely administrative chaos that will arise, in view of the complexity of the working families tax credit and the tight time scale. He raised the problem of the higher marginal withdrawal rates that will affect several hundred thousand people—always a direct consequence when one tries to extend tapering rates.

The hon. Member for Gravesham (Mr. Pond) committed himself, in a way that no Minister yet has—I hope the Financial Secretary will change that—to saying that the take-up rate for working families tax credit will be higher than that for family credit. We will watch this space. If the hon. Gentleman becomes a Minister, I believe that he will come to regret that statement.

The Chairman of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), raised his Committee's concerns about the use of negative resolution statutory instruments, and emphasised the importance of the Government having targets against which the success of the scheme can be measured.

The hon. Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) spent more time talking about the Conservative party than supporting the Bill. She churned out the soundbites, but failed to address real concerns about the working families tax credit, dismissing them as merely technical.

Yvette Cooper: The biggest concern for members of the family to whom I referred is whether they will have to pay an extra £35 a week in tax if the Conservative party is elected at the next general election. Taking into account the fact that the £1.5 billion is spent every year, not as a one-off, would the hon. Gentleman make that family pay that extra £35?

Mr. Gibb: The average family is already paying more than £500 a year extra in taxes after 18 months of the Labour Government.

In a powerful speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier) spoke of the intrusive nature of the working families tax credit and the fact that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) also said, the child care element penalises mothers who look after their own children. He said that the Government had played to all the weaknesses in the family credit system rather than to its strengths.

The hon. Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble) said that the Government's aim was not to encourage people to use professional child minders but simply to give women a choice. She should accept that the structuring of the new benefit will create a real incentive to use child minders and for auntie to register as a child minder.

My hon. Friend the Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) spoke of the real difficulties that business will face.

The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes) does not seem to understand that the detail of how the credit works matters and cannot simply be left until the Bill is in Committee; it matters to the companies which have to administer it and to the individuals who have to apply for it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) said that many groups on the left had nothing positive to say about the working families tax credit in their evidence to the Select Committee. Interventions in her speech by Labour Members highlighted the fact that they simply do not understand the difference between tax and spending. That is quite extraordinary.

When Martin Taylor, who was then chief executive of Barclays bank, was appointed by the Chancellor to examine the tax and benefit system, there were high hopes and great expectations, but reality soon began to bite. He said that a working families tax credit would reduce stigma but, in his evidence to the Select Committee, he said:

> "As far as the stigma goes, the hard and fast evidence in all these non-financial and psychological matters is hard to come by . . . The principal psychological assertion, and I agree with you it is an assertion; it is not proven."

The entire principle behind the Bill is based on no evidence. The assertion, as Martin Taylor put it, could well be true for large employers such as Barclays, but it is not true for 99 per cent. of businesses that employ fewer than 50 people.

Miss Kirkbride: I was in the Select Committee when Martin Taylor gave his evidence. It was significant that he suggested that the tax credit would be paid through the coding and it was only when we subsequently took evidence from Treasury officials that it became clear that that was completely impossible, as many anomalies would arise. Mr. Taylor's assumptions were completely thrown out by the Treasury mandarins.

Mr. Gibb: Indeed. I will come to that in just a moment.

The CBI said that single parents may well want to retain the option of payment through the Inland Revenue because they want to maintain confidentiality or avoid perceptions of stigma associated with payments of benefit.

The payment mechanism was to be the great step forward, and a system was to be created that would deliver not only the working families tax credit but a whole range of benefits through the tax system. Martin Taylor and the Government envisaged that payments could be made simply by altering the PAYE tax code for each employee, but, unfortunately, the Inland Revenue soon discovered that it was not possible to do that. It devised an N code and ran a series of model examples, but every one of them created a distortion after a few payment periods. When the Government discovered that, why did they not abandon the whole project and simply amend the anomalies that they saw in the family credit system?

The practical reality that working families tax credit cannot be delivered through the PAYE code has two consequences. First, it will mean a huge administrative

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burden on businesses, which have to administer the payment of the WFTC separately, and in addition to, PAYE. The CBI has said:

"Implementation of the WFTC will entail additional costs for all employers . . . the obligations on employers will increase considerably."

The explanatory notes on the Bill state that a regulatory impact assessment will be published in time for the Standing Committee. As my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) said at the beginning of the debate, it is a pity that that study is not available now, as it directly impacts on the viability of the Bill.

The second practical reality is that, because the benefit cannot be paid through the PAYE code, the whole notion that stigma will be removed has been lost. The credit will not be part of the tax system, but will be separately identified on the pay slip. Frankly, the Government are in a mess on the issue and they expect small businesses to pick up the costs of their mess.

The Bill itself has gaping holes where the meat of the legislation should be. It gives no details of how the working families tax credit will operate—for example, whether lone parents can opt to have the benefit paid directly to them at home rather than through the payroll. All that is to be decided in secondary, and therefore unamendable, legislation, which we are promised will be published in draft form by the Committee stage.

Why is that detail not in the Bill? We know the policy. It is set out in the Inland Revenue document, which has already been published. It is not true to say that how the tax credit will work is simply an administrative matter. Those issues are at the very root of the policy. Clause 12 concerns forms and documents to be used, so it concerns administration. The truth of the matter is that such clauses have been left out of the Bill because they are controversial and the Government want them to be debated out of sight and in a form in which they cannot be amended. With a majority of 179, what are the Government worried about?

The biggest gap in the Bill is the lack of any reference to child care tax credit. The phrase simply does not appear anywhere. There is not even a clause giving the Government the power to issue regulations. Clause 16—the definitions clause—does not define child care tax credit. The definition of tax credit does not mention them, simply stating that

"'tax credit' means working families tax credit or disabled person's tax credit".

The Inland Revenue document that I have here does mention child care tax credit, stating how much it is worth, how it will be administered and who is entitled to it, but there is no mention of them in the Bill. However, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, child care tax credit will cost up to £4 billion a year if everyone who is entitled to it takes them up.

According to the House of Commons Library, the Government intend to issue regulations under section 128 of the Social Security Contributions and Benefits Act 1992—I am sure that my hon. Friends will be interested to hear that. That is very clever but, yet again, it is designed to keep the most controversial part of the legislation out of the debate and out of scrutiny. A £4 billion expenditure plan, to which the Government have committed themselves, will receive no parliamentary scrutiny. I believe that that is what is called "new Labour".

The working families tax credit and the child care tax credit were key components of the Chancellor's Budget speech last March, but there was no sign of them in the Finance Bill that followed. Now we have the Tax Credits Bill—the flagship Bill of this Government—but it has been introduced in the House by a junior Treasury Minister. As my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham said, there is no sign of the Chancellor or of the Chief Secretary. The key element of the working families tax credit—child care tax credit—does not even appear in the Bill.

The Bill introduces a new benefit system, but it is a system that will increase dependency by extending state benefits to 400,000 more families, including many on more than £30,000 a year, when the Government say that they want to reduce dependency. The system will result in £1.5 billion more social security spending, according to the Government's figures—according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, it will result in £5.5 billion more—when the Government said that they wanted to reduce social security spending.

According to the right hon. Member for Birkenhead, the system is fraught with great dangers and offers bonuses for dishonesty. The CBI says that it will impose huge extra burdens on business. Instead of reducing stigma, it will increase it massively by involving employers in the confidential matter of claiming state benefits. The Bill is yet another piece of vandalism and political dogma, introducing an inadequate, ill-thought-through measure. For many thousands of lone parents who work for small companies, it will be disastrous.

9.40 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mrs. Barbara Roche): Let me start on a note of agreement with the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb): this has, indeed, been a lively, interesting debate with some good contributions. However, the hon. Gentleman's speech was the most arrant nonsense that I have heard in all my life. He completely refused to answer the basic question that will be asked by the constituents of every Conservative Member in the run-up to the next general election: will they abolish the £17 a week that is going to working families?

Mr. Paterson: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs. Roche: Let me make some progress. The hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton asked about take-up. We hope that everyone eligible will apply, which will help 1.3 million families. We hope that they will take their right to the tax credit. That compares very favourably with the old system.

Conservative Members painted a rosy picture of the old system: it was completely confidential and there were no problems. That further illustrates their detachment from the real world. In the real world, employers are often phoned up. Claimants collect benefit from post offices and people can see who goes there. This legislation offers something radical by honouring the ability of people to work and allowing working families to take advantage of it.

This legislation is a key element of the Government's strategy to make work pay and help people to move from welfare into work. We want to do something about that because the present system is failing hundreds of thousands of working families. Moving into a job from unemployment often leaves people little better off.

Miss Kirkbride: The Minister said that benefit claimants go to post offices. People who claim child benefit go to the post office, but that is a non-means-tested benefit. People in the post office do not know whether it is child benefit or low-income benefit that is being claimed. There is not the same stigma and it is not the same point.

Mrs. Roche: The hon. Lady and her colleagues made points about confidentiality in the old system that are not borne out.

The Bill will ensure that people can improve their income and circumstances. It will help to eliminate the growing division between working and non-working families. Under the previous Administration, that division became wider and wider. More and more people without work are living in poverty. Unlike the previous Government, we believe that one of the best ways to tackle poverty is by helping people into jobs. We believe that for a historic reason: my party—the party of Government, the Labour party—came into existence around the dignity of work and helping people to get into work, and we very much honour that. Those principles and the principles behind the legislation were well set out by my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Lorna Fitzsimons) and, in a brief but important speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner).

The Bill is a radical solution to old problems. What did we have from the Conservative party? We heard from the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) a moving speech about "The Archers", which seemed to dominate the theme of the day. I have to say to the hon. Gentleman, for whom I have some liking, that I am very worried because he attacked Eddie Grundy and Brian Aldridge. He may not know that Eddie Grundy has a significant fan club, and that the actor who plays Brian Aldridge is a constituent of mine and lives in my road. The hon. Gentleman had better watch out.

The working families tax credit is not family credit with a new name and a few tweaks around the edge. It is a significant modernisation of the tax and benefits system. The Government believe that it is right to take action to ensure that work pays more than benefits. Through the tax credits, we are delivering just that. People will get to keep more of what they earn and the tax credits will ensure that it pays people to work.

The hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) made an interesting and well-considered speech. Clearly, he has a different view of how the scheme ought to be structured. There is a fundamental disagreement between the Government and the Liberal Democrats about the nature of benefits and work.

It is right to provide proper help with child care costs so that parents can balance work and family responsibilities. The old system of family credit has failed in its provision for child care. We are determined to ensure that no one is unable to take up work through lack of access to affordable, quality child care, and to help parents better to balance work and family responsibilities.

Let us make no mistake: there is a deep philosophical difference between Conservative Members and the Government. It was well set out by the hon. Members for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) and for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier), who made clear their view that women should stay at home to look after young children. We want to give women choice. We want to give all families choice about what they do. That is very important.

Mr. Brazier: I am a little surprised by the hon. Lady's claim, given that I made it clear that my wife, who has small children, works for a small business. The Opposition's proposal would offer women the option either to stay at home or to go to work, and either way to enjoy the same tax allowance.

Mrs. Roche: The hon. Gentleman's intervention enables me to make a number of remarks. We have known each other for a number of years, and for more years than I care to mention we were students together. I know that he has an honest and consistent approach, which he showed this evening. He has attacked his own Government in the past and he attacks us now. He said, "This Bill is an attack on marriage. It undermines families." The biggest issue that undermines families is poverty, which is what the Bill seeks to address.

Mr. Paterson: The Minister mentions poverty. How many families earning more than £25,000 will benefit from the extra £1.5 billion, which is a crass breach of the Prime Minister's promise not to increase social security spending?

Mrs. Roche: I say to the hon. Gentleman—

Mr. Paterson: How many?

Mrs. Roche: If the hon. Gentleman will do me the courtesy of allowing me to answer his question, I am keen to help him. Hon. Members will know how keen I always am to help them. The answer to the question is that it will depend on the individual circumstances of each family.

The Opposition are fundamentally confused. They have put up a shadow benefits Minister, but the measure is not about benefits. It is about work and tax credits, but they have completely failed to understand that point. The Bill will deliver more help where it is most needed. Every working family will, for the first time, have a guaranteed minimum income of at least £10,000 a year. I shall be interested if, in the run-up to the next election, the Opposition campaign on the basis of abolishing that entitlement.

As a tax credit, rather than a benefit, the WFTC will be entirely different from family credit. The stigma attached to claiming benefit can be harmful to many people, and it contrasts starkly with a tax credit that can be paid directly into a bank account. There is a big psychological difference between receiving a giro and seeing a tax credit on a wage slip. That brings us back to a fundamental Labour principle: that the dignity of work is essential to everybody's self respect.

Mr. Bercow: I hope that the Financial Secretary accepts that the dignity derived from the retention of one's

[Mr. Bercow]

privacy is also important. In the light of concerns on that score that have been sincerely expressed by the Federation of Small Businesses and others, what specific steps is the hon. Lady taking to address that matter and to remove or minimise the threat to privacy that the new policy poses?

Mrs. Roche: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point, but let me reassure him and the House that there is no threat to confidentiality. The information is given to the Revenue, which then tells the employer the amount of the tax credit. Is the hon. Gentleman seriously saying that there is a problem or some sort of breach of privacy in connection with the Revenue? If so, my hon. Friend the Paymaster General will want to know all about it.

Mr. Gibb: Given that the tax credit is to be separately identified on the payslip, how can the hon. Gentleman claim that there will be no breach of confidentiality when the owner, the finance director and the payroll clerk will know which of the employees of the business is receiving a benefit from the state?

Mrs. Roche: Of course they will not know the individual circumstances of that family. Judges often ask, "Is that your best point?" I say exactly the same to the hon. Gentleman.

The Bill will lead to a radically different way of life for many people. That was well set out by my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Mr. Pond) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes). A key feature is that couples will have a free choice about payment: whether one or both partners work, if they decide that, in their personal circumstances, it would be best for the partner not in work to receive the tax credit, the Inland Revenue will pay the tax credit directly to that partner. In that respect, I am grateful for the helpful comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck), who succinctly and successfully pointed out to the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) the error of her ways.

Mr. Webb: Library estimates were that up to £900 million would be transferred from women to men. If the Financial Secretary believes that to be an overestimate, what figure would she put on the transfer?

Mrs. Roche: I listened carefully to the hon. Gentleman's speech. The calculation that produced that figure is based on an assumption that the Government certainly do not accept.

Several hon. Members rightly raised the problem of fraud. My right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) went into that matter in a characteristically thoughtful speech. In designing the legislation, we have put in place new measures that will help to keep fraud at as low a level as possible, building on the experience of studies into fraud in the existing system. In addition, the Inland Revenue is developing systems for detecting fraud.

The Bill gives the Inland Revenue the necessary powers to carry out inquiries into cases of suspected fraud which will be backed up with sanctions. We shall tackle fraud in tax credits with the same resolve with which we are tackling fraud in other areas of government activity.

Many Conservative Members spoke about the Bill's effects on employers. The Bill takes positive steps for employers. A committed, motivated work force is a great asset to any firm. By ensuring that they get their side of the measures right, employers will go a long way to retain employees and gain their respect for and loyalty to the company. This is win-win legislation for employers and employees.

Many Conservative Members referred to burdens on business. I thank the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) for her kind comments and I shall miss our rather detailed discussions on structural funds and her helpful contributions, but I take issue with her about burdens on business. My hon. Friend the Paymaster General has done a great deal of work with small firms organisations.

Mr. Ruffley: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Roche: No, I want to make progress.

Those organisations made an invaluable contribution to the design of the scheme and provided practical advice on the implementation of payment through the wage packet.

We shall take no lessons from Opposition Members about burdens on business. I remember only too well the previous Government's record. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members are shouting because they do not want to hear this. They do not like to be reminded of the facts. What was the previous Government's record? They removed 3,000 regulations on business but introduced 10,000 new ones. *[Interruption.]* They may keep shouting, but we will keep reminding them—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the Minister but hon. Members may not keep on shouting. I must have silence while the Minister replies.

Mrs. Roche: I am sorry that Conservative Members do not want to hear what I have to say, but they will hear much more. They will constantly be reminded.

We have been working to reduce the burden of red tape on business. We have reduced the burden of employees' national insurance contributions and we are transferring the Contributions Agency to the Inland Revenue to enable businesses to deal with one organisation for tax and national insurance purposes.

On 9 March 1998, I had the great pleasure of making the closing speech for the Government on the Third Reading of the National Minimum Wage Bill, which will affect the working lives of people in this country. Today, with this Bill, we put into place another vital piece of legislation to help working families. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 126, Noes 365.

Division No. 47] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*	Blunt, Crispin
Amess, David	Boswell, Tim
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael	Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James	Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*	Brady, Graham
Bercow, John	Brazier, Julian
Beresford, Sir Paul	Browning, Mrs Angela

Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Greenway, John
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Luff, Peter
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Wells, Bowen
Whittingdale, John
Wilkinson, John
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Nigel Waterson and Sir David Madel.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cabom, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Gorrie, Donald
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*

Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
Olner, Bill
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salmond, Alex
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sawford[illegible]
Sedg[illegible]an
Sheldon, [illegible]n Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Sloate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swinney, John
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vaz, Keith
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
Welsh, Andrew
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Hanson and Jane Kennedy.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 62 (Amendment on Second or Third Reading):—

The House divided: Ayes 320, Noes 160.

Division No. 48] **[10.13 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Caborn, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John

Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Gailbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Clive Betts and
Jane Kennedy.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Ballard, Jackie
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Greenway, John
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie

Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Luff, Peter
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Swinney, John
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Welsh, Andrew
Whittingdale, John
Wilkinson, John
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Nigel Waterson and
Sir David Madel.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

TAX CREDITS BILL [MONEY]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Tax Credits Bill, it is expedient to authorise—

(a) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenses incurred by the Commissioners of Inland Revenue in consequence of that Act;

(b) any increase attributable to that Act in the sums payable out of money so provided under any other Act; and

(c) the payment into the Consolidated Fund of any increase attributable to that Act in the sums payable into that Fund under any other Act.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Dangerous Drivers

10.24 pm

Mr. Bob Laxton (Derby, North): May I present to the House a petition of 2,304 names from Mrs. Susan Clewer, who lives in my constituency? The petition was drawn up after the tragic death of her 25-year-old son.

Andrew Clewer was crushed to death between the front of a double-decker public service bus and the rear of a stationary vehicle that he was unloading in Nottingham city centre just over a year ago.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for the Home Department to pass legislation with the effect that drivers who seriously injure or kill someone, and who are convicted of driving without due care and attention, shall be disqualified for a period of at least five years, and shall have to resit their driving test before their licence is reinstated; drivers convicted of causing death by dangerous driving shall be disqualified for a period of not less than 10 years, and shall have to resit their driving test before their licence is reinstated; and drivers convicted of driving with an excess of alcohol in their bloodstreams shall be disqualified for a period of not less than 15 years, and shall have to resit their driving test before their licence is reinstated. A second such offence should lead to permanent disqualification.

The petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

A34

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

10.26 pm

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): The very fact that I have secured the debate shows that persistence pays off. I have applied religiously for Adjournment debates week in, week out, and I will not allow tonight's sparse attendance to prevent me from making my points as strongly as I can on behalf of constituents who will be affected by the problems created by, and caused around, the A34 where it passes through my constituency. In fact, the strength of feeling in my constituency is in inverse proportion to attendance here tonight—but I am delighted to see that the transport Minister is present, and I look forward to hearing her response.

I want to take the Minister for a journey along the A34, visiting some of our local black spots. That is a sad thing to have to say about an otherwise beautiful constituency. On our journey, I shall endeavour to paint a holistic picture of the problems surrounding the road, and ask the Minister's Department and the Highways Agency to adopt an equally holistic, and co-ordinated, approach to some of the problems—for problems there most certainly are.

During my relatively short time as a Member of Parliament, I have met a previous Transport Minister in the present Government to discuss the matter. I have also met Highways Agency officials on the site, and have received, and read carefully, many petitions and papers on the subject. I am sure that the Minister's pile of correspondence and documents on the subject is as daunting as mine.

If the Minister and I were indeed to drive down the A34, the first section down which we would drive would be the stretch between the M40 at Wendlebury and the Peartree intersection, which is the turning to north Oxford. Such is the noise of the road that if we were trying to talk, we would have to turn up the radio, or at least speak up. Obviously, the problem is not great for people in cars, but it is huge for people living nearby whose lives are blighted by the noise on that section of the road. They cannot use their gardens, because there is constant noise from a busy road down which cars and lorries travel, including heavy goods vehicles. The road has become increasingly busy since the opening of the M40 and the Newbury bypass, and since—apparently—the amount of goods transported by road has increased.

It is obvious, and cannot be disputed, that the noise is not solely due to the volume of traffic—which, although the extent of some developments was not clear when the road was built, might have been anticipated. Much of the noise is plainly caused by the surface on the section concerned. Not for nothing is the road known as the noisiest in Britain. It is a concrete road whose surface grooves were constructed too deeply: I do not think that there is any doubt about the fact that they were constructed more deeply than they should have been. The only issue now is whether the Government are liable to make reparation.

A major problem has been caused to people living in parts of my constituency—Gosford, Water Eaton parish, parts of Kidlington and parts of north Oxford. Other areas are also affected, such as Islip in the constituency of Banbury, and villages on the western side of the A34.

[Dr. Evan Harris]

In 1983, the then Department of Transport calculated the expected noise from this section of the road—an increase of about 3 to 8 decibels by 2004. In 1990—a year after the road was opened—the Department recognised that, by 2004, the noise increase would be greater than that expectation, and in 1992 it confirmed that the depth of the grooves were greater than expected. The county council produced data from the Transport Research Laboratory, a respected independent body, showing that noise levels were significantly higher. The area was recognised, at the time of the building of the road, to be noise sensitive, because of the earth mounds that were created then.

There was little joy from the previous Government about dealing with the problem. Indeed, the letters that we received from Ministers in response to requests for amelioration of the surface ranged from the disappointing to what was considered to be rude. Expectations were raised by the election of the Labour Government. In spring 1997, *Kidlington, Oxford and Abingdon Labour News* showed the Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities, the right hon. Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith)—who was then shadow Secretary of State for Transport and who I have notified of tonight's debate—pictured with local Labour candidates and councillors, saying that they were getting together

"to try to solve the noise problems of the A34 near Kidlington."

The right hon. Gentleman

"took up the issue with the Secretary of State"

following representations from the area,

"drawing attention to the severity of the problem and seeking clear guidance on the criteria which need to be satisfied to get the case for action considered further."

He added that Labour was

"very concerned at the damage that road noise made to people's quality of life and an incoming Labour Government would review programming to see if more priority could be given to noise reduction."

A local Labour county councillor, who has long campaigned on this issue—I pay tribute to him for that—welcomed

"the beginning of a solution to this unbearable noise pollution that people have suffered since 1991."

And so say all of us, but it is time for those expectations to be realised by a Government who, we note, have acknowledged that noise pollution can blight people's lives.

I refer to the interesting—and, in many respects, worthy—paper entitled "A New Deal for Trunk Roads in England". Chapter 6.4 talks about:

"A budget for noise mitigation on existing roads".

The document, which was published in July 1998, states:

"There are a number of cases where local residents are particularly concerned about noise from existing roads and where re-surfacing cannot be justified on normal maintenance grounds."

I digress to say that one of the benefits of the concrete section is that it is long lived; therefore the misery of my constituents, and of residents of neighbouring areas, will also be long lived, unless there is some amelioration of the road surface on grounds other than normal maintenance. The road is not scheduled for resurfacing maintenance for many years to come.

The document continues:

"In these cases, alternative measures such as noise barriers might be appropriate."

We wait to hear whether that would be considered here as a temporary measure. The document goes on:

"Up to now the policy has been only to consider cases on roads built before 1969 and to apply extremely rigorous criteria with the result that very few cases have qualified for relief. These criteria were tightened by the previous Government. We propose"—

that is the Labour Government—

"to establish revised criteria and a ring-fenced annual budget. These should enable the Highways Agency over a reasonable period of time to deal with some of the most serious and pressing cases. We shall make a separate announcement about this in due course."

As far as that goes, I welcome those sentiments. There is recognition, as there is in other documents, that noise pollution is as serious an environmental problem for the people affected by it as pollution by exhaust fumes or other, more recognised—in a sense, popular—forms of pollution. We still await that further announcement, and I say directly to the Minister that we are looking at this road as a test of whether the Government are able to provide sufficient money and sufficiently appropriate criteria to allow the case of this road to be considered among the bids that I imagine will be made. The Minister will know that the case of the road has gone to the parliamentary ombudsman. I understand that she will not be able to comment on the detail of the case, but the fact that the ombudsman has had the case for two years and that it has not been dismissed in that time suggests that there must at least be a reasonable case as to whether there is already a necessity for government of whatever sort—the Highways Agency or Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions—to make good the damage that was done.

I continue the journey down the A34. We enter the section between Peartree and Botley, which passes relatively close to the beautiful hamlet of Wytham in my constituency. That does not have the concrete surface, but is still a cause of noise pollution, albeit on a lower scale than the more northern area.

I am pleased to say that the section now has a quiet thin-layer surface. We are grateful that that has been done, but it has been at a certain cost to Oxford. I want to take the opportunity of the debate to ask the Minister whether she can take action to deal with the disruption to the lives of people in Oxford caused by avoidable actions of the Highways Agency in managing the resurfacing of parts of the road.

Consultation at the end of last year about the work on that section of the road was poor. A meeting was held in Wytham village hall in August. I was not even told about that meeting as the sitting Member of Parliament.

As soon as I heard about the proposals—it was just before the work had started—I wrote a letter pleading for a quiet, thin-layer surface to be used. I am delighted that I received a letter back saying that a thin surface would be used, albeit the letter came on the last day that roadworks were taking place, so it was informing me of historical fact.

A decision was made by the Highways Agency not to use a contraflow and completely to close the northbound section. It was also decided not to do night working, but to have day and night working. Chaos resulted, with the complete diversion of northbound traffic through neighbouring areas, particularly along Botley road, which

needs no further excuses for transport chaos. It is difficult to calculate the damage that was caused to people's life styles, to the ambience in that part of Oxford, and to the businesses along Botley road.

I have received representations from businesses along Botley road about how their passing trade suffered by the logjam that was created. I know that the right hon. Member for Oxford, East was concerned about the extra traffic along the eastern bypass, which jammed that up completely.

Can the Minister reassure us that, in future, if roadworks are done on that busy road, separate steps might be taken to allow traffic still to flow north-south, to avoid diverting traffic through Oxford, or, as the Automobile Association has suggested, to signal much earlier that alternative major routes could be used and that people should not go anywhere near Oxford? It is alleged that the signing of potential diversions was not clear enough and that people missed the eastern bypass as a possible route and then tried to head through Oxford town centre.

We then come on our journey to the Botley section of the A34. I declare an interest in that I live in that area. I was keen in making my complaints not to prioritise that part of the A34 simply because I live there; it might have been seen as the reason for raising the matter. That is why looking at the whole road holistically is the appropriate way to go forward.

In that section of the road, the houses are closer to the A34 than any other section of the highway. Therefore, there are problems with the thundering vibrations of heavy goods vehicles using that road, with noise and fumes and with vehicles travelling at speed, which raises safety concerns. There have been instances of vehicles ending up in people's gardens along Westminster way because of gaps in safety barriers—such gaps may or may not be inevitable—and because of bends on that road.

Just before the last general election, a temporary 50 mph speed limit was put in both as a safety measure—in fact, it was headlined as a safety measure because that is the only basis on which the police will support speed restrictions that they do not have the resources to enforce—and to reduce the noise problems. The problem with the temporary speed limit, which was welcome although politically timed, was that it was inadequately enforced. The police said that they would have had difficulties enforcing it even if they were minded to do so because of what appeared to be the dubious legality of the consultation process. We are still awaiting enforcement.

The temporary speed limit was made permanent last September. Despite the lack of enforcement, there has been a reduction in speed, and therefore noise pollution, along that section of the road. Enforcement would produce further improvement. We are delighted that the Government are considering allowing the revenue raised from speeding fines to be used by the agencies involved in setting up speed cameras and administrating the fines system.

Oxfordshire county council in partnership with Thames Valley police plans to install more speed cameras. However, that would require a manpower reduction in Thames Valley police—which is not what my constituents want—to provide the funds to build and run the cameras and process the fines, since the police receive none of the revenue. I am delighted that on 9 December, after representations from many Members and from the Liberal Democrats in particular, the Government agreed that hypothecation was feasible and that either some of the money could be recuperated by those authorities or, as the police would prefer, an administrative charge could be added to the fine to make sure that enforcement was not carried out at a loss.

I am delighted that the northbound stretch of the part of the A34 that was due for maintenance was resurfaced with a noise-reducing thin layer. That, combined with the limited but significant effects of the speed limit, has made a considerable difference to people living on the western side of the A34. However, the eastern side has not yet had a thin-layer surface applied. It was unfortunate that both sides could not have been resurfaced at the same time. The benefit of the noise reduction on the northbound side is partially lost by the fact that heavy goods vehicles thunder along a noisy road surface southbound. There are patches of thin layer, but that only serves to make the distinction even more profound.

According to the police and the Highways Agency, there are plans for more signing into the 50-mph zone. We are still waiting for that to happen. I am curious to know why signing changes could not have been made in the northern part of that section at the same time as the Peartree to Botley resurfacing.

There are further problems in that section of the road in respect of some of the junctions. In particular, the northbound slip road on to the A34 from the A420 junction is rather a blind corner. I believe that it is an accident waiting to happen. I have inspected it with local councillors and campaigners—the Hinkseys A34 action group—who have worked very hard on all the issues that I have mentioned. The Highways Agency agrees that it is a dangerous junction and that if the opportunity arose something could be done to improve it.

There are difficulties in egress from Stanley close and slightly less but still significant difficulties in egress from North Hinksey village, North Hinksey lane and Southern bypass. There are also difficulties in egress on to the northbound section of the road from Westminster way and Harcourt hill. There are many students in the area and there has been a fatality. Investment must be made to prevent accidents.

I wish to end by asking the Minister to agree that a strategy needs to be adopted so that we do not suffer either continued disruption or untackled problems.

10.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Glenda Jackson): I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) on his persistence in securing this debate and in presenting the concerns of his constituents ever since he was returned to this House. He kindly took me on what was virtually a three-part journey down the A34, and he displayed in some detail the road's significant impact on his constituents who live so close to it, and on the neighbouring community of North Hinksey.

The hon. Gentleman rightly highlighted the fact that the considerations being undertaken by the ombudsman on the difficulties experienced on the first part of our journey down the A34 are not ones upon which I may comment. I would like to thank him for highlighting the work undertaken by the now Minister for Employment,

[Ms Glenda Jackson]

Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith), before the general election on noise pollution. That campaign has produced a policy on the part of the Labour Government. I will touch on that issue in more detail later.

I would like to take the House not down the A34, but back in time. The A34 originally formed the Winchester to Preston trunk road and, with the A33 to the south of Winchester, formed a strategic link between the port of Southampton, the midlands and the north-west. It was not, however, purpose built, being predominately a single carriageway, passing through the centres of many towns and cities along its route, including Oxford.

The current route of the A34 through Botley was built in the early 1960s as part of an extensive programme of improvements, primarily to take long-distance through traffic out of Oxford city centre. However, it also forms part of the city's ring road, aiding local traffic movement around Oxford. It follows the western edge of the valley cut by the River Thames and its tributaries, and there is no obvious alternative route.

At the time it was built, there were few, if any, concerns regarding the long-term consequences of traffic growth. We now know that the old "predict-and-provide" method of road planning was flawed, as it took little or no account of the fact that improving the road network itself generates traffic growth. By then, the M40 had been built, as had the Peartree hill to Wendlebury section of the A34; with one notable exception, this completed the upgrade of the A34 into a high-speed dual carriageway route—a fact borne out by the subsequent unexpectedly high levels of traffic growth along the A34, resulting in a large number of lorries driving through Botley and North Hinksey. I know that some of the hon. Gentleman's constituents fear that the recent opening of the Newbury bypass to the south will have a similar impact.

In effect, what we have heard from the hon. Gentleman is a microcosm of a problem that can be replicated across the whole of the UK as a direct result of the failure of previous Administrations to tackle the issue of how we create a properly integrated transport system and how we make the best use of our existing infrastructure. There was a failure to move away from expecting our roads to be the main movers of people and goods. That is why the Government have introduced an integrated transport strategy.

In this instance, the hon. Gentleman is concerned with what can be done to improve conditions for his constituents. Much of the problem has resulted from the way in which our transport system was allowed to grow in such an ad hoc and unregulated way. This is something that we are determined to address.

I would like to take this opportunity to remind the House of one or two aspects which are relevant to the situation which was so graphically detailed by the hon. Gentleman. The situation on the relevant part of the A34 has resulted from the high levels of traffic growth experienced in recent years, as the A34 provides a vital link between the Hampshire ports and our industrial heartland, giving access to the single European market and our other trading partners.

It is the Government's aim to move more of our goods by rail. Central to that aim will be the establishment of a strategic rail authority, which will have the remit of bringing coherence to the railway system, ensuring that it meets the needs of the passengers and freight customers whom it serves, and encouraging the shift towards the use of rail freight, but much freight will still need to travel by road. We aim to publish proposals to improve the efficiency of our lorry fleet and, on a local level, to encourage co-operation between the freight operators and local authorities on lorry routing and delivery hours.

Our transport White Paper and the associated paper, "A New Deal for Trunk Roads in England", also contain proposals to deal with the more immediate problems associated with living close to a busy road.

On the second part of our journey down the A34, the hon. Gentleman highlighted the difficulties caused by recent road works on the A34 north of Botley. It is my understanding that, under health and safety legislation, the Highways Agency is required to provide a safe working environment and to ensure the safety of the travelling public. With older dual carriageways such as the A34, it is not possible to achieve that without closing one carriageway fully.

I assure the hon. Gentleman that the agency does not close one carriageway of a busy road without an in-depth consideration of the consequences and consultation with the police. The hon. Gentleman said that the work could have been done more quickly, and the debate in the Oxford newspapers centred, I understand, around the time taken to reconstruct the Seacourt stream bridge, but it overlooked the fact that the contract length was determined by the need to rebuild large sections of the carriageway. I will certainly raise with the Highways Agency the issue of the failure to consult adequately or in sufficient time.

I understand that, at the hon. Gentleman's request, Michael Ford, the Highways Agency's area manager for the A34, visited last May the area that constituted the third part of our journey, and discussed these issues with the parish council and other interested parties. Following that meeting, the Highways Agency commissioned its managing agents, P. B. Kennedy and Donkin Ltd., to carry out two studies to investigate what improvements could be made.

The first study will consider safety-related issues, such as the improvements to the north-facing slip roads at the Botley interchange and safer access to the various minor roads that join the A34 in the area. The second will concentrate on environmental aspects, such as the replacement of the chain-link fence between Westminster way and the A34. Depending on those studies, which are expected to be completed later this year, the agency will consider a package of improvement measures.

Noise is perhaps the most frequent cause of complaint from people living alongside trunk roads. We have announced that we will tackle the problem on several fronts. Much work has been done in recent years on developing road surfaces, and the newest quieter surfaces can reduce noise by the same amount as halving the traffic flow. We have instructed the Highways Agency to specify that noise-reducing surfacing will be considered when carrying out resurfacing works in noise-sensitive areas.

Indeed, as the hon. Gentleman said, that work has already been done on the northbound carriageway of

the A34 through Botley, and I know that his constituents appreciate the resultant reduction in traffic noise. The southbound carriageway does not at present need resurfacing, but I can assure him that, when it does, the most appropriate noise-reducing surface will be used.

The hon. Gentleman has asked the Department about porous asphalt, although he did not mention it tonight. It is true that using that material would bring a further reduction in traffic noise. However, that material cannot be used when merely resurfacing the road. The nature of the material requires special drainage. It needs to be laid in a relatively thick layer compared with the more recently developed quieter surfaces and that often means that additional works are required. For example, the central reserve safety fencing may need to be raised and there can be problems in maintaining headroom. Those factors dramatically increase costs and the length of time needed for the work. Using porous asphalt is really only an option with a new road, or where a road is being completely rebuilt.

I touched on the campaigning efforts of my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, East, to which the hon. Gentleman paid tribute before the general election. He also drew attention to the fact that the Government have announced that we intend to establish a ring-fenced budget to provide noise mitigation along some of the worst-affected sections of the trunk road network. To implement that policy, it is important that we use selection criteria that are as fair as possible—

The motion having been made after Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, pursuant to the Standing Order.*

Adjourned at four minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 27 January 1999

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Textile Industry

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

9.33 am

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak about the United Kingdom textile industry, because of a meeting that I had in the Christmas recess with the management and union representatives at John Heathcoat, a very important company in my constituency.

Let me begin by putting into context the company's importance in my constituency and the contribution that it makes to the UK textile industry. In the early 1800s, John Heathcoat invented the revolutionary bobbin net-making machine and he set up a company to manufacture net in 1808, moving down to Tiverton in 1816 following problems with the Luddites in the midlands. That is the end of the history lesson.

The company is well established and has been in my constituency for a great many years. It is a private company, with all the share capital residing in the Tiverton area. That gives it the freedom to move quickly to get new products into the marketplace. It has a varied manufacturing base, with weaving, warp knitting—both industrial and apparel—weft or jersey knitting, and dyeing and finishing.

Last year, the company had a turnover of £37.8 million and achieved a pre-tax profit of £3.9 million. Although still profitable, the company, along with most in the manufacturing industry, is finding the present situation difficult and is doubtful that last year's profit figures will be matched this year.

The company continues to reinvest heavily in new machinery and techniques, and over the past five years has averaged more than £2 million a year in capital investment, all financed through its own resources. It currently provides 550 jobs in the south-west, spread across all levels of operative administration, technical and senior management. It operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It has products that people want to buy and keeps its work force fully employed.

John Heathcoat operates mainly in niche areas of business and runs its own research and development unit, focusing on customers' needs and the solutions that they require, with a degree of confidentiality that many other companies find it difficult to match. Among its products are woven fabrics for car airbags and toothed load-transmission belts; parachute fabrics for the Ministry of Defence and other countries; geotextile mattress fabrics; sailcloths—its sailcloth was on Lisa Clayton's "Spirit of Birmingham" for her single-handed round-the-world trip; specialist seating fabric for the new Mercedes smart car; and fabrics using knitted spacer technology, now extensively used in cot mattresses to help to provide airways for the baby if it rolls onto its face. A development of that technology is now being trialled for intimate apparel.

Heathcoat is one of the largest producers of bridal and dress net in Europe and supplies those fabrics globally. Heathcoat net fabrics are used by the Kirov, Bolshoi and National ballet companies. Its industrial warp knits are used in hose reinforcement in high-temperature and high-pressure hose manufacture and in protective garments for chainsaw users.

The company has deliberately chosen to invest in and make products for a wide variety of niche markets. It is not merely producing mass products that might have competition from the far east; it has deliberately invested in producing quality, value-added products that are needed both at home and abroad.

The company's jersey fabric is used for a wide range of garments sold in the larger UK retail stores and it has an export trade in specialist fabrics for riding wear. It also produces fabrics for career wear—uniforms—used by banks, building societies and retail outlets, and apparel for use in hostile working environments, including fire-resistant and acid-resistant treated fabrics.

As well as providing an in-house service, the company's dyeing and finishing unit offers a commission dyeing service to other manufacturers and converters selling to the major UK chain stores.

Last year, 45 per cent. of the company's turnover was direct export. It has been very successful and has not rested on its laurels or been overtaken by commercial or scientific developments; rather, it has been involved in innovation in this country's textile industry. It has also paid attention to its environmental performance, being sensitive to the area of great natural beauty in which we in Devon are privileged to live. Last year, the company achieved accreditation to the international environmental management system ISO 14001—becoming the first textile company incorporating dyeing and finishing processes to achieve that accreditation in the UK. All staff on site received environmental awareness training as part of the programme.

On the quality side, the company has been registered to ISO 9002 since 1989, and is currently working to achieve ISO 9001—design and development aspects for quality systems—which it hopes to achieve this year. For many years, the company has enjoyed a good working relationship with its recognised union, the Transport and General Workers Union, with which the company works closely to ensure that it remains at the forefront of technology and achieves the best productivity commensurate with its chosen role in niche markets. At my meeting at the beginning of January with unions and management, I was worried that such a company should be concerned for the future of the industry.

Last week, the Prime Minister was asked about job losses at Wrangler jeans by the hon. Member for Falkirk, West (Mr. Canavan), who suggested that the crisis facing the entire clothing and textile industry in this country was

[Mrs. Angela Browning]

due mainly to high interest rates and the high value of sterling. That view has been commented on by the British Apparel and Textile Confederation, which said recently:

"Whilst the recent fall in interest rates is to be welcomed, it will be at least six months before its benefits begin to flow through into the economy and thus into the industry. The damage had already been done with the high interest rates we have had to endure over many months."

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Does my hon. Friend accept that, as regards niche markets, exports are important for the industry as a whole—particularly in the east midlands? We accept that there are problems with sourcing by major retailers, but the industry has managed to capture a number of niche markets. My hon. Friend mentioned a firm in her constituency, and a number of firms in the east midlands have also looked at those niche markets. That is why the export market is particularly important to the textile industry, and that is why it is particularly vulnerable when we have high levels of sterling.

Mrs. Browning: My hon. Friend is exactly right. The strength of sterling has led to exports becoming increasingly difficult, and that has been compounded by economic problems in some of our major markets. In addition, imports have become cheaper.

Over the first six months of 1998, exports of clothing and textiles were 20 per cent. down on the comparative period of the previous year. At the same time, consumer confidence in the UK market has been dented. At a time when UK manufacturing industry is having to contend with increased costs, it has also had to contend with social legislation, including the working time regulations and the national minimum wage. The British Apparel and Textile Confederation has stated that

"imported products become that much more attractive and may be the only way in which to provide the necessary margin for manufacturers and retailers alike".

That is a very worrying statement. The TGWU estimates that 500 jobs are being lost in the industry every week. If one looks at the pattern of job losses in the last six months of 1998 alone, one sees that there has been an acceleration.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Will the hon. Lady acknowledge that that is exactly the problem for some very respected companies, such as the one that she has mentioned and Laura Ashley in my constituency which, through no fault of its own, has found itself having to downsize simply to stay afloat?

Mrs. Browning: Indeed. That trend is gathering momentum, and that is why it is good to have an opportunity to debate the matter on the Floor of the House. I have a long list, covering two whole sides of A4, of the job losses in the past six months in the industry. These are spread throughout the country, but particularly affect the midlands, the north of England and Scotland.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Has my hon. Friend given any thought to the level of interest rates in the UK? I am sure that the Minister will remind the House that interest rates in the UK are at their lowest for a long time. Is not the real problem that while in the rest of Europe interest rates are at 3 per cent., our interest rates are at more than 6 per cent.? In fact, we are increasingly seeing the level of the euro go down and the level of the pound go up. The Government must intervene, and not simply leave it to the Bank of England.

Mrs. Browning: My hon. Friend points to an important aspect of why the industry is under pressure. However, there are other aspects where the Government could clearly intervene to assist the industry, and I hope to cover some of those in my speech.

The job losses that have been identified—of which the unions are well aware—must be put into context. We are talking about 500 job losses, on average, a week, in an industry that employs just over 350,000 people. It is interesting to focus also on the contribution that the industry makes to our national economy. The manufacture of textiles and apparel contributed £7 billion to the output of the UK economy in 1997. It is an important industry, but it is not just the individual companies that we need to look at. The Government must take a more active role in the industry, as it is has a national dimension that is very important to our economy.

I wish to quote from an article in *The Observer* last September, which looked at what was happening in some of the bigger companies:

"The exodus from textile manufacturing in the UK has, of course, been going on for decades. And in recent years, all of the main quoted textile companies—Courtauld Textiles, Dewhirst, Coats Viyella, William Baird and Claremont among them—have closed down factories in Britain and opened new ones in Morocco, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and other countries with much lower labour costs.

Earlier in the year, Dawson, which makes Pringle sweaters, closed two factories with the loss of 720 jobs. Burberry and Aquascutum, which have lost sales in Asia, have brought in short-time working and redundancies. Coats Viyella, one of the country's biggest manufacturers, has seen its share price sink like a lead balloon, and faced a further humiliation last week as it was forced to abandon the planned demerger".

The rate at which textiles production is moving overseas varies from company to company, but there is a trend for the removal overseas of companies manufacturing in this country which is very concerning. The article continued:

"Dewhirst, one of Marks and Spencer's oldest suppliers, has told analysts it will have 60 per cent. of production abroad by the end of the year, rising to 70 per cent. by the end of next year."

Hon. Members will no doubt have focused on the fact that Marks and Spencer has made some public statements about where it will source its apparel and clothing from, but it is important to understand that that that does not necessarily mean that the company is saying that it has decided to source from abroad, and not from the UK. Marks and Spencer, like many other retailers, is now faced with a situation where its sources of supply—people with whom it has had producer-supplier relationships for many years—have upped sticks and moved. Marks and Spencer and other companies must now choose—do they stick with those people they know, albeit that they are now producing abroad, or do they seek new suppliers within the UK?

The Minister for Energy and Industry (Mr. John Battle): What about Heathcoat?

Madam Speaker: Order. The Minister must not intervene from a sedentary position. It makes it very difficult for the *Hansard* reporters.

Mrs. Browning: I will give way to the Minister if he wishes to make a point at this stage.

Mr. Battle: I apologise, Madam Speaker. I simply said to the hon. Lady that her whole case was based on the grounds that there were no suppliers, but she spelt out that Heathcoat was doing very well. In her conversations with the industry, was she not advised that real damage was done to the supply chain if Members of Parliament talked down the industry and pretended that it had all gone?

Mrs. Browning: I am disappointed that the Minister should intervene in such a manner on my opening speech. Will he listen to me? I am not making party political points. I am speaking on behalf of a successful company that is concerned about its industry. It is no good the Minister's taking one company in isolation. I do not want the management and unions from Heathcoat to have to tell me that they will put the work force on short time working or close. If companies in my constituency see a trend developing in their industry, they will want to intervene, and they will seek my help. What is happening in the textile industry must be apparent to the Minister. We want companies such as Heathcoat to keep working seven days a week, and that is why I have initiated the debate.

Mr. Battle *rose—*

Mrs. Browning: I have given way to the Minister already, and he will be able to respond later. Perhaps he should hear the rest of my speech before he intervenes.

Mr. Battle *rose—*

Mrs. Browning: I am too generous to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Battle: I come from Leeds, so I know something about the textile industry, and I speak on it with some passion. During the period when the hon. Lady was a Minister, my constituency alone lost more jobs every week than the numbers she is referring to today.

Mrs. Browning: We are not talking about former Conservative Governments. The Government, and the Minister, have been in office for nearly two years. As he has chosen to conduct the debate on that level, I shall do what I did not intend to do, and read out the list of job losses for which the Government have been responsible. Is the hon. Gentleman seriously telling me that it does not matter, and that he would rather talk about the situation that pertained two, four or 10 years ago? He should be addressing today, tomorrow and the next 10 years.

In June 1998, Pringle in the north-east lost 280 jobs. In June 1998, Pringle in Scotland lost 245. On 30 June in Scotland, Dawson lost 600. In July, William Baird, in the north-east, lost 25 jobs. On 1 July, Todd and Duncan in Scotland lost 50 jobs. On 30 July, Morley and Kemp in the east midlands lost 37. In August, in the north-east, Textillion lost 100 jobs. Also in August, SR Gent in south Yorkshire lost 50 jobs. On 8 August, Dawson lost 720 more jobs in Scotland. On 22 August, Dewhirst in Scotland lost 120. On 21 September, William Baird in the north-east lost 450. The Minister may laugh if he wants.

Last October, Praxis Tailoring in the north-east lost 15 jobs. In October, JPS Ltd. lost 200 jobs in the north-east. I am half-way through my list, and I have reached only last October, when Kangol in the north-east also lost 200 jobs, Karrimore in the north-east lost 35 jobs and William Sugden had 35 job losses, also in the north-east. On 14 October, Rieter-Scragg had 97 job losses in the north-west. On 16 October, Textillion had a further 240 job losses in the north-east. Slimma lost 103 jobs in Scotland on 21 October. On 22 October, 10 jobs were lost at Woolmart in Yorkshire. On 23 October, the Jerome Group in Yorkshire had 50 job losses.

On 6 November, FII had 130 job losses in the west midlands. On 6 November, Desmond and Sons lost 225 jobs in Northern Ireland. On 10 November, Coats Optilon had 61 job losses in the north-east. On 11 November, Umbro lost 70 jobs in the north-west. Edward Hall Bleachworks on 13 November lost 70 in the east midlands. On 14 November, C and J Clark had 120 job losses in the west midlands. In the north-east, 260 jobs were lost on 19 November at William Baird. Dewhirst lost 600 jobs across the country on 27 November. On the same day, Laura Ashley announced 100 job losses in Wales.

On 2 December, Courtaulds announced 1,220 job losses across the country. On 18 December, Chamberlain Components had 24 job losses in the east midlands. On 22 December, Dawson lost 300 jobs in Scotland. On 22 December, Sherwood lost 300 jobs in the east midlands.

The trend has continued in 1999. We do not want to hear a Minister telling us that that has nothing to do with the Government. All those job losses occurred during the Government's stewardship. I am asking the Minister—politely—to hear what the industry is saying. What can he and the Government do to stop a clear trend that is alarming companies such as John Heathcoat in Tiverton? Those companies are worried not about this week, but about the next few years.

What does the industry want? Heathcoat wrote to me:

"We need the Government to help promote the UK textile industry."

I welcome the Minister's initiative in setting up an industry-led group. However, the Government must do more than hold meetings and sit around tables talking. The Department of Trade and Industry has agreed to support only 19 overseas events to assist United Kingdom exports. That compares badly with the Department's support for 31 last year. At a time when exports are being hit by the strength of sterling and the problems of the far east, it seems ironic that the DTI should provide less support to help companies expand into export markets.

Mr. Phil Woolas (Oldham, East and Saddleworth): The point about overseas exports is important, but does the hon. Lady agree that the number of companies attending those exhibitions and trade fairs is more important than

[Mr. Phil Woolas]

the number of events that occur? I welcome her call for more DTI support for our industry, but we should be clear about that point.

Mrs. Browning: I do not have a breakdown of those figures, but concern has been expressed by the industry's trade body, the British Apparel and Textile Confederation. If the Government are doing better than the confederation believes, it is surely incumbent on the Government to communicate better and to ensure that the trade body knows what they are doing. The confederation is expressing public concern about the support coming from the Government this year, in comparison with that given last year. If that concern is unfounded, there is clearly a lack of communication.

The industry wants a level playing field. We speak often of level playing fields, but they are vital. They make the difference between winning and not winning contracts. The industry want a level field at home and abroad.

Heathcoat of Tiverton is based in an area that would not be immediately identified as having a large textile manufacturing sector. There is an industry in the south-west, but the area is less well known for it than the north, the midlands and Scotland. If the Government intervene domestically to support the industry, through grants or in any other way, it is essential that they should do so in a way that is fair to companies such as mine in the south-west. It would be quite wrong to address the crisis by putting support into companies or regions that would disadvantage other companies in the textile industry in another part of the country.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): Other Governments of divers compositions have helped particular companies to the detriment of other companies in the same industry. The Minister must listen to the hon. Lady's warning.

Mrs. Browning: That is quite right. If the Government are to intervene through regional or sectoral aid, it is vital that they do not set one domestic company against another simply because of geographical position.

The Government can assist companies such as John Heathcoat in another way. I mentioned a level playing field and we all know of the difficulties that companies in all industries encounter when tendering for contracts. As someone who worked in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for three years, I am well aware that within the European Union there is always concern about how hidden subsidies are used to give an unfair advantage when companies from different states are tendering for the same contract.

At my meeting with John Heathcoat, I was concerned to hear about one problem that the company brought to my attention, which involved a contract with the Ministry of Defence for supplying the RAF coverall. I have written to the Minister's colleague, the Minister for Defence Procurement, about that issue and I will outline the company's experience—it is well established in the niche market of supplying that product—and the difficulties that it encountered when tendering for that contract. I shall read a letter from the company, as it includes various registered trademark names, which I hope that hon. Members will follow if I put them into context. The company writes:

"We have been supplying approximately 10,000 metres/year of this fabric"—

it is supplying Ballyclare Special Products, which produces the RAF coverall—

"woven from Nomex (DuPont) Aramid fibre.

In September we responded to a new tender from Ballyclare for 30,000 metres/year over the next three years.

Last month"—

that is, in December, just before Christmas—

"Ballyclare were informed by the MOD that they had not been successful. The contract had been awarded to a German company called Freutcher, who will apparently commission garments to be made, part in Sarajevo and part in Tunisia. The garment tender price was claimed to be 5 per cent. lower than Ballyclare's quotation.

However, Freutcher's tender is based on Conex (Teijin fibre) which is priced lower than Nomex, and is a fibre which we are informed that the MOD has not yet fully evaluated.

Ballyclare contacted the MOD before submitting their tender to enquire whether they should offer an alternative to Nomex. The response was negative, they should only submit based on Nomex."

Ballyclare is extremely annoyed with that scenario simply because it has discovered that the German company's tender was based on an alternative fabric. The letter says that the company is

"very aggrieved . . . as with Conex being cheaper yarn it is likely that we could at least have matched the competitive tender. We have now lost valuable business at a difficult time for the textile manufacturing industry, putting jobs at risk in our weaving unit."

As I wrote only 10 days ago I do not expect a reply yet, but I draw that matter to the Minister's attention because there is room for Government intervention if one set of rules are applied to one company and another set to others—in that case a company supplying the main supplier—and if that results in United Kingdom jobs being put at risk because the contract goes to a German company. I do not expect the Minister to give me an answer today, unless he has one, but I hope that he will encourage his right hon. Friend the Minister for Defence Procurement to look into the matter and take a personal interest in how such important contracts are lost, as that clearly proves that we do not have a level playing field. That is a genuine case for Government intervention.

The Government could also be making representations on behalf of the industry in another area, which has been flagged up in the newspapers in the past few days. Owing to the banana war, which hon. Members will have read about, the situation with the United States is now serious. I will not go into too much detail, but as a former Agriculture Minister I am only too familiar with the banana trading arrangements of the Caribbean countries and competing south American countries, which all want to export their bananas to the European Union. There is a banana war between the EU and the United States over World Trade Organisation regulations, and the US is threatening 100 per cent. tariffs on EU exports as a reprisal because it cannot get its own way. The tariffs will target cashmere knitwear and printed cotton.

A statement from the industry reads:

"For the cashmere industry, this threat is not far short of a disaster, as the early part of the year is when US buyers place their orders for delivery from June onwards. Cashmere spinners in

Yorkshire and cashmere spinners and weavers in the Borders of Scotland are already having orders cancelled and job losses are imminent".

That is the result of the stalemate, and those of us who take an interest in the matter have been following the WTO talks daily. Perhaps the Minister can give us an update. As I understand it, yesterday's talks were deferred, yet again. The Government have a role here. They can intervene at the highest level. I would like to think that the Prime Minister will speak to President Clinton about the matter.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): The hon. Lady will understand that people in the borders are as concerned as she is. It is to be hoped that my hon. Friend the Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore) will catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and will be able to develop the arguments from the point of view of south-east Scotland. People in the borders rightly believe that the United Kingdom Government have given the United States international support, which was justified at the time, but their reward for such support is a tariff that is damaging our industry today, here and now. Factories in Hawick are closing because the delivery dates for their garments will be caught by the 100 per cent. tariff. It will bankrupt those businesses if they knit the garments and then have to pay the penalty.

Mrs. Browning: The hon. Gentleman speaks as a representative of people working in that industry and knows far better than I do the impact on his constituents. I endorse his comments. He is right. The Government can legitimately intervene in such issues and I should like to think that the Minister will assure the House from the Dispatch Box that pressure will be brought to bear on the United States at the highest level—at prime ministerial level. If we in this House believe in anything, it is in free trade—well, we Conservatives certainly do. We do not like tariffs and barriers. If Labour's new-found devotion to free market philosophy is genuine, the Prime Minister will not hesitate to pick up that phone, speak to the President and ensure that the barriers are brought down—and not merely in a few months' time when it suits everyone to sit around a table for yet more talks, because we need action in a hurry.

John Heathcoat in my constituency is not a sunset company. I hope that I have clearly demonstrated that it has not rested on its laurels. However, the company is worried and I hope that the Minister will understand that it is not asking me to make representations to the Government with a begging bowl in my hand asking for largesse. I have highlighted several issues in which the Government can rightly intervene and assist the industry.

The managing director of Heathcoat wrote to me saying:

"We are prepared to make our own way in the market; that is our job and we have the managerial skills and trained workforce to do that, so we do not want to appear to the Government to be coming begging for handouts, that is most definitely not our style.

We do not however want to find ourselves disadvantaged in our efforts by assistance or other grants being made to our competitors in Europe or the UK.

We have a good record of investment and training, and have always been prepared to stand on our own expertise and entrepreneurial skills, and have an excellent record on both Environment and Energy savings. What we are looking for is a policy to 'talk up' the textile industry at Governmental level to dispel the view that exists in the country (and regrettably in some areas within the industry) that all is lost, that textiles is a sunset industry and all we can do is wait while it dies a lingering death.

This cannot be the case, the country cannot afford to lose the jobs that the Textile industry provides, and we feel that we should get at the very least moral support from the Government for those companies that have not joined the race to low cost countries and have decided to keep their manufacturing facilities, and the jobs that go with it, within the UK.

We do run a research unit which is continually looking at new uses for textiles and at new processing methods, but we find that the amount of paperwork involved in obtaining a grant and the work necessary in preparing it is burdensome to say the least. We should not have to employ consultants to show us how to best prepare cases for Brussels, we should get Government encouragement and help to do this ourselves."

I have already given the House an example of the difficulties that the company encountered in tendering for one EU contract. Although I am discouraged by the Minister's intervention and his brickbat approach, I hope that he will give us a substantive reply to the debate that will address the practical aspects of legitimate Government intervention so that John Heathcoat can continue for hundreds of years as one of the leading textile companies in Britain within a vibrant sector that can hold its head up high.

10.11 am

Mr. Phil Woolas (Oldham, East and Saddleworth): I start by offering the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) the traditional congratulations on obtaining this morning's debate; I do so genuinely. Many hon. Members on both sides of the House have been campaigning for the textile industry, some for 20 or 30 years. I welcome the hon. Lady's initiative and agree with much of what she has said.

The company in her constituency has clearly taken initiatives and found a niche market, but nevertheless finds the industry fiercely competitive. I would correct the hon. Lady on one point, and I hope that she will recognise my good intentions in doing so. She spoke about the scale of the industry and its importance to our economy, and mentioned a figure of £7 billion in output. That figure represents the total exports of the clothing and textile industry. Its total output is some £27 billion.

The textile industry employs between 350,000 and 370,000 people. It is bigger than the car industry, the chemical industry and the agriculture industry. Although I am not calling for direct subsidy for the textile industry, on many occasions I strain at the leash to do so because of factors with which hon. Members are familiar. It is a hugely important industry, as the Government have recognised in their action plan—an initiative that has been welcomed by the House.

I chair the all-party parliamentary clothing and textiles group and I know that there are disagreements regarding the cause of the problems. Interest rates and the high value of sterling have been mentioned. Ministers, industrialists and the unions recognise that there is a six-month delay in the effect on orders, and subsequently jobs, as a result of problems in the industry, which were prevalent in the latter part of 1998. However, those problems cannot be attributed entirely to interest rates and the high value of sterling. The trend has continued for 100 years. The clothing and textile industry—particularly the production of finished garments—is labour intensive and that makes it susceptible to overseas competition on labour costs.

[Mr. Phil Woolas]

We are a genuinely all-party group. If any hon. Member present is interested in joining, let me say that there is no subscription and we are very friendly bunch. We have a regional make-up, and the south-west is extremely important. We agree that the UK textiles industry cannot compete on labour costs. The minimum wage has not yet been introduced, so it has had no effect, despite what some people in the industry say. However, even at the low level of £3.60 per hour, it is irrelevant in terms of overseas competition as, in Morocco, for example, that sum is equivalent to the weekly wage.

Mrs. Browning: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to put it on the record that although the industry is concerned about the minimum wage, John Heathcoat does not pay below the minimum wage, so it is not an issue for that company.

Mr. Woolas: I recognise that our best companies pay above the minimum wage. That argument supports the action plan as it shows that companies such as Heathcoat are successful not on the basis of suppressing labour costs but as a result of high investment and high skill input.

We cannot attribute all the problems in the industry to interest rates and the high value of sterling, although both factors are now moving in the right direction. However, there are long-term trends and we need to address them. The action plan for the clothing, textile and footwear industry and the carpet manufacturers and unions has been greatly encouraged by the Government, and attempts to provide an analysis and find a way forward.

Let me say a few words about Marks and Spencer, as a great deal of nonsense has been written and spoken about that company. There is no doubt that the predominant position of Marks and Spencer causes problems for suppliers in the clothing industry. It is an extremely powerful operator within the market. In some cases that can be good, as Marks and Spencer has saved many jobs by continuing to source from the United Kingdom. However, other factories have closed, some would say at the whim of a Marks and Spencer buyer making a telephone call and moving an order overseas.

Marks and Spencer has recognised that its change not only in senior management but in emphasis from buyers to marketing is extremely important. The action plan encourages partnership between retailers and manufacturing sectors. To be fair, Marks and Spencer has made that point to its furnishing and clothing suppliers. British manufacturers and retailers should work together to use their unique advantage over overseas suppliers—the ability to respond quickly.

As chair of the all-party group, I am conscious of always wearing clothing that has been made in Britain. As I have said before, Mr. Deputy Speaker, everything you can see and everything that you cannot see that I am wearing is made in Britain. [HON. MEMBERS: "Prove it."] I shall not respond to that invitation, as I am sure it would not be allowed.

My tie is of modern stain-resistant fabric made and developed in the United Kingdom. It is a good example of a niche market, of high research input and a quick response by a United Kingdom supplier. The relationship between manufacturers, suppliers and retailers, which is part of what the action plan addresses, is an extremely important development.

Mr. David Tredinnick (Bosworth): Is it not a fact that Marks and Spencer often requires small suppliers to supply only Marks and Spencer, and that that brings problems?

Mr. Woolas: I agree. The buying policy of Marks and Spencer might be understandable from the company's narrow point of view, but it is very damaging to the industry because it inverts the market. Suppliers find that they have to put all their eggs in one basket and that is dangerous for any business. I therefore recognise the importance of the hon. Gentleman's point.

The action plan offers us a consensus on the way forward to ensure that Government support for the industry is effective and fast, and the regional strategies that have been developed are part and parcel of that process. However, in our debate today, there have been no calls for direct subsidy; indeed, I note that the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton fell short of calling for direct subsidy, although she dropped some strong hints about protectionism, which surprised me given her party's views on that matter. I genuinely believe that the action plan is in the best interests of the industry, but we must recognise that competition on labour costs will never be a way forward and I am pleased about the hon. Lady's remarks about salary levels in the company that she used as the basis for the debate.

I should like to emphasise the points that have been made about the dollar banana affair and the trade war over cashmere. The UK clothing and textiles industry is, in many ways, an amalgamation of small specialist industries. We find a rich history and heritage and a very high skill base in all parts of the United Kingdom and in all parts of the industry—whether lace in Nottingham or cashmere on the borders and so on. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister has visited the industries in many of those places and is familiar with them. It is not his fault that he is from Yorkshire, although I must choose my words carefully because Saddleworth is in real Yorkshire—it is still in Yorkshire, as far as we in Saddleworth are concerned—but Oldham is not. The two areas—Oldham's cotton industry and the wool industry in Saddleworth—offer a good example of my point.

The cashmere industry is one of our finest export industries. It is impossible to overstate its importance to areas in the east midlands, Yorkshire and the Scottish borders where the industry has been built up over hundreds of years. The danger for the cashmere knitted industry lies in the fact that it is seasonal. During the next two or three weeks, trade fairs will take place—I think that the first is next week—at which clothing goods will be sold for sale in United States stores during the coming year. If we lose that business at those trade fairs over the next month, the danger is not merely that we shall lose the business this year, but that it will inevitably go to China, because there is nowhere else in the world that does such work. If the business goes to China this year because of cost, and despite the efforts of US retailers who have protested against their Government's action, it is difficult to envisage how we can win it back.

The UK-made brand of cashmere knitted goods is very powerful and US consumers want to buy it. The trade war is a matter for the European Union, the United States and

the WTO, but I realise that my right hon. Friends the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry are aware of the situation. I urge Ministers to do all they can, urgently, because if we cannot change the decision, there will be factory closures during the next few weeks.

Although the future of the industry is not guaranteed even if the action plan is implemented, its implementation remains a necessary criterion for that future. Looming on the horizon are two important matters. The first is the renegotiation of the multi-fibre arrangement, which is of huge importance. I do not expect my hon. Friend the Minister to give us details of the UK's approach, but I want to flag up the matter to underline its importance. The second is the European regional development fund money. At present, we have Retex money and objective 2 funding, and there is a correlation between objective 2 status and many aspects of the UK clothing and textile industry. We need to ensure that, in deliberations about European regional development fund money, the clothing and textile industry is given due consideration. I welcome this morning's debate. Although I disagree with some of the points made by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton, I hope that all hon. Members in the Chamber are united on the importance of promoting the industry.

10.25 am

Mr. Michael Moore (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale): Like the hon. Member for Oldham, East and Saddleworth (Mr. Woolas), I congratulate the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) on securing the debate and bringing this important matter before the House. I am especially grateful for the opportunity to participate in the debate, not least because of the significance of textiles to my area in the Scottish borders. In that area, as in many other parts of the country, there has been a gradual decline over several years in the number of jobs in the textiles sector. In the late 1960s, in an area with a population of 100,000, about 14,000 jobs depended on the industry; two years ago, the number of jobs was down to about 5,000. However, the textile industry still represents 50 per cent. of manufacturing jobs in the Scottish borders and in certain towns—not least, where I live in Innerleithen—96 per cent. of jobs are dependent on textiles. In the much larger town of Hawick, the figure is 88 per cent., which is still a large percentage.

Over the past couple of years, we in the borders have not needed to seek out troubles. There has been a range of job losses, in farming and electronics but, especially in textiles. Companies such as Claridge Mills, Ettrick and Yarrow Spinners, Laidlaw and Fairgrieve, Gardiners and, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), Pringle have all suffered significant job losses and some of the smaller companies are now closed. That is a roll call of some of the finest names in textiles in Scotland, perhaps even in the United Kingdom, and people are concerned about what the future holds for the industry, especially during the next few weeks and months.

The downward trend in textiles is understood. We have had a useful debate about the pressures on the industry, some of which, as was pointed out, have existed for more than 100 years. In each part of the country, there are successful businesses that are doing extremely well because they have turned themselves into world leaders, by adopting good business techniques and focusing on world-class products in niche markets. In my constituency, that process is assisted by the Scottish college of textiles, which has done much work on advanced and applied textile science and technology. The college has now successfully merged with Heriot-Watt university and we hope that its expertise and capability will be enhanced.

Although there have been job losses during the past 20 or 30 years, there have also been successes. Companies such as Lochcarron, currently based in Galashiels, have built themselves up and are now significant employers. During that period, the strength, resilience and development of the cashmere business in our area have been very noticeable. Although problems have been exacerbated by the recent levels of the pound and interest rates—perhaps, in due course, there will even be an effect caused by our non-participation in the euro—people understand that those are large issues on which there is legitimate debate. However, in the borders, people are perplexed about why a trade war between the United States and the European Union should have such a potentially devastating impact on our area—indeed, no one can understand it.

The banana war, as it is called, has nothing to do with the borders. It may relate to important principles of trade between the EU and the United States, but British and Scottish borders traders have been very fair competitors over the years. Whereas so much devastation has happened in our area as a result of outside factors involving decisions by companies in the middle of America or elsewhere to close huge factories, the current problem has nothing to do with economic trends. It seems to us that it is the result of pure spite and retaliation, which should have nothing to do with our area.

I should like to highlight the dependency of the borders on the cashmere sector. It is a highly successful sector. It has allowed itself to develop into premium-pricing areas. Cashmere from the borders features in all the top areas. In Tokyo, on Madison avenue, in London and Paris—you name it—Scottish borders cashmere will be in evidence. The cashmere sector employs 2,500 people, which is almost half the remaining jobs in textiles. It is estimated that there are £20 million-worth of exports a year to the United States alone. Fifty per cent. of EU cashmere exports to the United States come from the United Kingdom. It is estimated locally that as much as 90 per cent. of United Kingdom cashmere production comes from the borders.

As the hon. Member for Oldham, East and Saddleworth (Mr. Woolas) has said, the catastrophe looming in the industry arises because now is the buying season. Now the important decisions are being taken by American buyers about what they will stock in their shops in the next few months. While we hear much about how quickly trade wars can be stopped, the United States buyers are looking now at what prices they will be paying this spring or autumn. As they see the doubling of prices that they may be expected to pay, they look to local producers to share that pain. Some businesses that are very dependent on the United States for their business are contemplating either losing the business because they are no longer competitive or taking on absolutely massive risks by insulating the prices for their buyers.

The borders is only a small area of 100,000 people. Compared to some of the major conurbations in England and Scotland, it may not seem significant, but we have

[Mr. Michael Moore]

seen in so many sectors in the last while the devastation of small communities across the Scottish borders. People cannot comprehend why this particular trade development should put so many more jobs at risk. I am the first to acknowledge that some extremely complex negotiations are going on. I have been pleased at the way in which the Department of Trade and Industry and other Departments have been keen to brief me and my hon. Friend the Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) on developments.

When I was across in Washington recently with the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs looking at inward investment, the British ambassador arranged for a meeting between me and members of the United States state department. We have had access to people to make our points in various parts of America, Britain and Brussels. I am under no illusions about the complexity of the arguments. However, we find that the confidence is going out of the industry by the day, and people are worrying about what the future holds.

We are not clear about what happened this week at the WTO. To all outside the arcane negotiations, it appears to have been a complete shambles. That is something that we in our part of the world cannot afford to sustain for much longer. I hope that the Minister will be able to update the House on the industry dispute and reinforce the efforts that he, his Department and other Ministers at whatever senior level are doing to ensure that this trade war, which has absolutely nothing to do with the Scottish borders, is ended before it ends jobs in the Scottish borders.

10.34 am

Mr. Terry Rooney (Bradford, North): I recognise the pressure on time so I will try to be brief. I congratulate the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) on securing this debate. It gives us an opportunity to talk about an important industry. I am from Bradford, which used to be the wool capital of the world. I am not sure what description is applied to it now. It has been devastated by what has happened to wool textiles in the past 20 years. My mother, father and two brothers have spent their working lives in textiles. Between them, they have 91 years' service, but unfortunately they also have 23 redundancies. Every reason for problems in the textiles industry has caused a redundancy in my family. I speak passionately from personal experience of the problems.

My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham, East and Saddleworth (Mr. Woolas) said that there had been 100 years of decline in the textiles industry. Unlike him, I cannot go back that far, but I can look back at significant factors that have affected the wool textiles industry in the past three decades. I am afraid that the management of the industry have a lot to answer for over many years. They failed to be bright and proactive.

In the 1960s, managers decided that the industry could survive if it reduced its labour costs by importing labour from the Indian subcontinent. That would be the solution. There was no investment in plant, machinery, new products or new buildings. They simply reduced costs by bringing in labour from overseas. That obviously failed.

In the 1970s, the answer was seen to be mergers. They did not often involve redundancies, but dozens of smaller companies merged without cohesion, co-ordination or management plans for the future. Companies were merged simply to create bigger groups. In the 1980s, for whatever reasons, the industry suffered the most severe recession that it had ever seen and in West Yorkshire we lost 50,000 jobs. The list that the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton read out was impressive, but the county of West Yorkshire lost 50,000 jobs in that recession. That produced at last a hard-headed look by the industry at itself, its future and where it could go. As other hon. Members have commented, that refocus resulted in the industry going for the high added value markets, especially Japan and the United States. That brought other problems, to which I shall return.

After the recession there was serious investment in the industry. Sadly, in recent years that investment has fallen off, but in the late 1980s and early 1990s we began to see a plan of action. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton mentioned the Transport and General Workers Union. It is what I have always called the National Union of Dyers, Bleachers and Textile Workers, which was subverted by dubious means into the monolith known as the TGWU. The textile workers section headquarters is in Bradford and always will be. It is about 100 yards from my constituency office and the general secretary is the greatest guy in Britain.

Three issues have had a long-term impact on the industry in the past 10 years. One is the multi-fibre arrangement and the previous Government's failure actively to enforce it and promote its future. The second is the Uruguay round of the general agreement on tariffs and trade. The textiles industry was sold out by the previous President of the Board of Trade, the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine), in order to reach an agreement for agriculture. The consequence of that was an agreement by the free traders of the previous Government that exports from Britain to the United States would have a 37 per cent. tariff imposed on them. So much for the free traders in Washington. The tariff would be reduced by 1 per cent. a year for 10 years. So the next time GATT is up for review, we shall start from a 27 per cent. tariff on exports to the United States.

The third issue was assisted area status. My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham, East and Saddleworth mentioned objective 2, but assisted area status has always had a bigger impact. In 1993, my city of Bradford had that status removed in order that Hastings, Yarmouth and places like that could get it. That had a massive impact on the possibility of helping textiles companies in temporary difficulties by giving them regional selective assistance. Many companies went to the wall that could have survived if they had received assistance for a temporary period. We want to live not in the past but in the future, but we need to know and understand how we got to the present position, so that the same mistakes are not made again.

I point out to my hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Industry—who, as I said last month, was born in the same hospital as me—that we still face the problem that the Governments of Germany, Belgium and Italy are giving significant, illegal support to their textile industries. Either we take that illegal step, or we stop them taking it. I do not care which, but if our industry is to compete, it must do so on the same basis as theirs. In Germany, support is given through the länder, the local government, and is semi-hidden, but everybody knows it is going on. It is not fair; it is not right and it must stop.

I support what my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham, East and Saddleworth said about the action plan for the industry. I hope that all sides in the industry seek to make that work. We need a much more focused effort on design, sales and marketing because our products are good, but other aspects have not always been as good. We need to sort out the supply chain and get all the links talking to each other so that they understand each other's needs and problems.

Our textile industry is a fine industry with superb products. We need to promote and sustain this £27 billion industry and its 350,000 jobs. We need not only to look to the future but to learn from the past.

10.41 am

Mr. David Tredinnick (Bosworth): Twelve years ago, I made my maiden speech on the hosiery, knitwear and textile industries. I went to consult the leaders of those industries in my constituency and asked them, "What are the key points that I should make in the Chamber?" They said, "You must refer to the import of cheap Chinese underwear." I need hardly point out that that was a difficult speech to write.

I have lived and breathed the issue since then, and today I want to highlight the problems in Leicestershire, where the industry is very important and accounts for 9 per cent.—35,000—of all jobs in the county. The problems are exacerbated by the fact that three quarters of companies in the industry employ 25 or fewer people, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) pointed out.

The key point that I want to make to the Minister is that high interest rates have had a devastating impact on the local economy, which has contributed more than anything else to companies' difficulties. I know that interest rates have come down, it was too little, too late. It was too late for companies such as Ray Allen Ltd in my constituency. In my constituency, many of those companies have been downsizing.

The Minister said earlier that we were talking down the industry. That was an outrageous remark. I have come to the debate to articulate the industry's problems and tell the Government how serious those problems are. The Minister should remember that, when the previous Government left office, we had a stable economy with low interest rates.

Mr. Battle: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Tredinnick: The Minister will have an opportunity to speak in a moment. He knows that he took over when the economy was in a much better state than it is now and that interest rates have caused the key problems.

The hon. Member for Oldham, East and Saddleworth (Mr. Woolas) and others referred to low-cost competition. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. Time is limited and the Minister will have an opportunity to respond in a minute. Sedentary remarks are not helping the debate.

Mr. Tredinnick: Low-cost competition from overseas is a devastating factor, as are problems with the multi-fibre arrangement and possible trade sanctions caused by a dispute about bananas, which were referred to earlier. We had to worry about straight bananas and bent sausages in the previous Parliament, and they are back again.

The Minister must take on board the fact that manufacturers in my constituency blame the Government and hold them to account. We look forward to his response.

10.45 am

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): It is a customary courtesy to thank and congratulate the hon. Member who opens an Adjournment debate, but in this case, it goes beyond a mere formality. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning), as the whole House should be, for introducing the subject, and for the doughty way in which she stood up for her constituents' interests.

In no sense are my remarks intended to derogate the major contributions that have been made by hon. Members from all parties, who knew what they were talking about, including the hon. Members for Oldham, East and Saddleworth (Mr. Woolas) and for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore), my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Mr. Tredinnick) and the hon. Member for Bradford, North (Mr. Rooney). They were an eloquent bunch and explained the industry's problems.

The opening contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton was helpful in that she set in context the particular problems of one major player and reminded us, as did other hon. Members, of the industry's complexity and wide geographical distribution. As one hon. Member pointed out, the industry directly employs more than 350,000 people, so it counts for us all.

We know that the industry is rich in tradition—it can well claim to have founded the industrial revolution—but it has modernised itself, particularly in the past few years, with a heavy investment programme and radical changes of attitude. It is extremely encouraging, for example, that 60 per cent. of wool production is exported. The problem is that having reformed itself, the industry is now frustrated.

We were disappointed by the Minister's earlier remarks. He can redeem himself in a moment. I make him an offer: we will not run down the industry—we do not seek in any way to do so—if he will not fall into the trap of complacency in dealing with the industry's problems. Megaphone diplomacy about the past, and even the present, is nowhere near as important as a constructive attitude to the future.

The present position is not a happy one, which is demonstrated by representations that my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton and I have received. The British Apparel and Textile Confederation says tactfully that the economic situation is very difficult and points out that exports in the first six months of last year were 20 per cent. down on the comparable period of the previous year. The Confederation of British Wool Textiles says that there are no signs of any improvement and 1999 will clearly be another traumatic year for the industry.

Surveys show that last year, when consumer demand was comparatively buoyant and rose by 3.3 per cent. in the first half of the year, employment dropped by 4.3 per cent. That is the absolute figure and does not take account of short-time working. There is a difficulty.

[Mr. Tim Boswell]

A possible trap for the industry is that it will pursue niche markets. Of course it is important that every industry should target an appropriate market, but I hope that the Minister and anyone listening to the debate will not feel that the answer to the industry's problems is to select a particular sector and disregard all the others. Two areas of clear excellence in this country are bespoke tailoring and designer clothes. From my days in education, I have links with Central St. Martin's college. It is great to go to its student shows, particularly when one remembers that previous students have been called Galliano and McQueen. However, that is only a small percentage of the industry. When selecting markets, Savile row and the catwalk are all very well, but underpants matter too.

That brings me naturally to Marks and Spencer, which is the major player in the industry, and other important and well-known brand names. Those companies face severe commercial difficulties at the moment, arising from flat domestic demand, which has led to overstocking. That leads to a sales and sell-off culture, which has repercussions as people hold back their purchases for the best opportunity and can yet further depress prices. I am sure that companies represented by interests in the UK and people who know the industry well will devise strategies for trading through that, but there is likely to be a further shift abroad of parts of the supply chain and a reduction in UK employment.

The Government cannot duck their responsibility for the problems arising from the exchange rate. The exchange rate is coming down at last, but it has added to problems which have been further compounded by the weakness of the south-east Asian economies in particular.

As the hon. Member for Bradford, North reminded us, we must remember the industry's potential. In the White Paper on competitiveness, the Government acknowledged that import pressures will increase further when the existing quotas are phased out in 2005. Several hon. Members mentioned the specific and immediate problems arising from the banana war and its impact on the cashmere industry. It is reasonable to ask the Minister and his colleagues at the highest level to be as robust as possible in standing up for British interests.

I must mention the internal solutions that the industry is seeking with the assistance of Government. The White Paper conceded that, despite all the efforts that have been made recently, productivity is still higher in Europe than in the United Kingdom, but the textile industry wants to do something about it. Like other hon. Members, I especially welcome the efforts made by the social partners on both sides of the industry to develop an action plan to make the industry more productive. That may include some requests for Government help and, in particular, export promotion. We can argue endlessly about who did what, but the point is that there is a strong interest in expanding the British footprint in that sphere.

We need to keep a careful eye on our European competitors in order to produce a level playing field. As the hon. Member for Bradford, North said, either we can do more or they can do less, but it needs to be on a fair basis.

A point that has not been flagged up as clearly as it should have been is the need for a constructive, industrywide approach to staff training, development and retention. I know that the Minister met representatives of both sides of the industry on 24 November to talk about the action plan, and it will be helpful if I leave him time to tell us where we have got to with that.

The innovation and excellence of the industry, and its determination to modernise itself and to fit itself for international competitive trading conditions, could come to nothing if sensible general economic policies are not pursued. If the industry is suffering now, before the national minimum wage has come into effect or, indeed, before the working time directive has come fully into effect, the implication is that there will be further pressure on the industry later. The same is true in respect of further taxes which are building up on business generally.

What we ask of the Government is realistic intervention—yes, we will use that word—to help the industry to overcome its internal difficulties and to fit itself for the future. Above all, we ask for a sensible macro-economic policy which will steer this industry and others in the right direction. The Government have their responsibilities to the industry and more generally, but nothing can compensate for the failure of economic policy, a failure already apparent in the difficulties that the industry, despite all its efforts, is facing.

10.53 am

The Minister for Energy and Industry (Mr. John Battle): I thank the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) most sincerely for raising this topic on the Floor of the House. My regret is that we cannot speak about textiles all morning. We should have debated the topic much more when I was in opposition. I regret that I shall be able to respond to only a few key points.

My own experience of the textile industry in my city of Leeds goes back some years. Between 1981 and 1996, when interest rates peaked at 15 per cent., 9,000 textile jobs were lost in my city alone. I speak with some passion and anger about the fact that Opposition Members have woken up late to the problem because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, North (Mr. Rooney) explained, the devastation of the textile and clothing industry caused by Government policies over the past 20 years is incontrovertible.

I welcome all the speeches and interventions made today. Serious points have been made, and in the few minutes that I have I should at least touch on one or two of them, especially the threat to the cashmere and textile industry in the borders, Yorkshire and elsewhere. The industry is affected by the trade dispute between the United States of America and the European Union over bananas—arcane though that may seem to many of us. We are doing all that we can to resolve that dispute. I assure the House that intense negotiations have taken place.

I understand that the World Trade Organisation is meeting formally again tomorrow to pick up the threads of the conversation. In the meantime, the European Union, the US and the Director General of the WTO are in negotiation. I assure the House that the Government are raising these matters at the very highest ministerial and governmental levels, with letters and other exchanges being used to keep up the pressure. We will not resile from keeping up the challenge to ensure that our industry is not jeopardised.

Of course we are supporting exports by the textile and clothing sectors. As for trade fair arrangements, in the new 1998 round, 45 clothing bids—or 62 per cent—were successful, not 19. That is higher than the average for other industries, so the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton might concede that we are making a considerable effort. As my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham, East and Saddleworth (Mr. Woolas) said, it is the number of firms that take part that is important, and more than 700 firms will benefit. If the sponsors' predictions are correct, more textile and clothing firms will be supported in 1999–2000 than were supported in 1988–89. We are keen to promote exports and are doing all we can—that is a fact, not a party political point.

Let me put the debate in context. Of course I am not complacent. I accept that the industry is under pressure—I see that in my own city—but I could have read a list of success stories to the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton. The picture is patchy, but in contrast to what happened over the previous 20 years, the bottom is not falling out of the industry. We are stabilising the industry. Our macro-economic strategy is reducing interest rates and getting sterling down to a competitive level. Our general economic policy is stabilising the conditions for the textile and clothing industry, and there are successes.

The company that the hon. Lady mentioned is a success story that should be celebrated, and I welcome her efforts in that regard. Other successes include Desmonds and Brinton's which has made carpet tiles for the new Hong Kong airport. There are also examples of innovation—for example, knitwear companies are using new computer technology. Some companies are using new technology to refresh and regenerate old manufacturing processes. That is precisely the way they must go if they are to be able to compete in intensely competitive global markets.

Textiles were mentioned in a positive light on the news at 6 pm the other day. Last September, a company called Autofil put money into the purchase of a £20 million factory near Nottingham. It makes yarn for car seats, and 70 per cent. of its sales are overseas. The directors said:

"it was quite a gamble but despite the strong pound and talk of recession it seems to be paying off."

The BBC news bulletin stated that for a company like Autofil

"official statistics are largely irrelevant . . . trading conditions are tough but well managed companies with good products can still prosper and that's a big difference between this economic down-turn and the last recession."

The Government are taking action, as shown by my Department's funding for 25 innovation projects in this sector, such as that at J. W. Whiteheads in Bradford, which is doing research into the development of new yarns and technologies. Reuben Gaunt in Yorkshire is improving the strength of yarns during weaving. Skills and training projects are backed by the centres of training and excellence, some of which were mentioned. Mention was also made of Kidderminster college, and work is being done at colleges in Leeds to ensure that the proper skills and training exist to take the industry into the next century.

On the supply chain, we are working with the apparel and textiles challenge to bring the retailers, buyers and designers together to integrate the various parts of the industry so that it works more efficiently.

That is some of the action that our Government are taking and will continue to take. We shall support regional selective assistance. In the past few years, £9.6 million has been allocated. Attempts have been made to call the industry together, not for a talking shop, but to draw up an action plan, which belongs to the industry and the trade unions working together to develop and deliver it—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We must move on to the next debate.

Travel Links (North-West)

11 am

Mr. Jim Dobbin (Heywood and Middleton): May I, through you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, thank the Speaker for the opportunity to have this debate. It is good to see other hon. Members from the north-west present in the Chamber. That illustrates the importance of transport issues in our developing economic environment.

The north-west region includes the conurbations of Greater Manchester and Merseyside, the shire counties of Cheshire, Cumbria and Lancashire, and the unitary authorities of Warrington, Halton, Blackpool and Blackburn, and the High Peak of Derbyshire. The region is mainly urban in character, but has substantial rural aspects. Any transport policy must therefore take account of urban and rural concerns.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister on bringing together planning, land use, transport, the environment and regional development. That will provide the opportunity for co-operation in those facets, which has been missing for decades.

I shall make some general points, but I shall tend to concentrate on Greater Manchester. I hope that colleagues will have time to cover the other, no less important areas in the region.

The Government's White Paper, "A New Deal for Transport—Better for Everyone", is the first comprehensive review of national transport policy for well over 20 years, and represents a welcome and much-needed move away from the policies of deregulation and privatisation, which have, sadly, characterised transport policy for the past two decades.

The policies of the previous Government brought considerable hardship to the people of Greater Manchester, with disruption to local bus services accelerating a decline in patronage, and the local rail network being starved of much-needed investment.

The White Paper is a radical attempt to develop a transport strategy that is fully integrated, by which I mean not only integrated between different transport modes to ensure that they are safe, reliable, convenient and easily accessible, but integrated with other Government policies. Only now can transport policy be allowed to play its full and rightful part in the successful regeneration of Greater Manchester, thus contributing to economic growth, providing a sustainable environment and allowing the population to participate fully in the on-going success of the region. Improved traffic links will help to attract industry to the north-west, thereby increasing employment.

Integrated transport cannot be achieved overnight. The previous Government dismantled most of that during their period in office, rather than smoothing the path to full integration. A fine example of the damage caused by the previous Government's transport policies was the 1986 fiasco of bus deregulation. The Transport Act 1985 took away the passenger transport executive's bus operating arm and swept away a mass of regulation.

Bus deregulation, it was said, would increase bus patronage, improve efficiency, reduce fares and cut subsidies. However, the reality in Greater Manchester was very different. Patronage declined by 26 per cent. and fares increased in real terms by about one third. Part of the problem was the chronic instability of the bus network in the free market environment. At one stage there were between 60 and 70 bus operators in the region, and the level of competition meant that there were hordes of buses aggressively vying for the available trade.

Levels of congestion and pollution in town centres and inner suburbs have increased. That has been particularly damaging to the health and quality of life of residents and visitors. The bus operators are not the ones who must bear the cost of the damage.

We hope that the White Paper will provide a framework that will enable the problems to be addressed. The launch in August last year of the Greater Manchester integration project, which is cited in the White Paper as model of best practice for others to follow, will set new standards for travel in the conurbation, and show how working in partnership can provide a public transport system with the qualities that people want.

Profitability in the bus industry depends critically on territorial control without too much competition. That is why, in the past few years, major private sector bus company conglomerates such as Stagecoach have developed. The logic is simple: there is no money in bus operations without a virtual monopoly. Such lack of competition is worrying and imposes increased costs on the passenger transport authority and executive. An economic regulator similar to the system that exists for rail is essential if bus transport is to play its proper role in an integrated transport system.

The dismantling of the UK rail system was another act of sheer vandalism. So far, we know that it has resulted in huge costs, phenomenal complexity, uncertainty and growing customer dissatisfaction. The establishment of the Strategic Rail Authority will provide a vision for the privatised railway, and through tough regulation—not deregulation—will make it more accountable to both passengers and freight customers.

On a more positive note, I shall highlight the considerable achievements of the region in transport terms. Greater Manchester has pioneered projects that are leading the way to the development of an integrated transport policy. As we all know, Greater Manchester is the home of Metrolink, the first modern street-running light rail system in Britain. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Blackley (Mr. Stringer), who led Manchester city council at the time that it was introduced.

The first line, from Bury to Altrincham, was opened in 1992 at a cost of £145 million, jointly funded by the public and private sectors. The system—the track, equipment, trams and so on—is wholly owned by the passenger transport executive, but it is operated under a 15-year franchise agreement with the private sector.

Phase 1 runs on former British Rail lines to Bury in the north of the county through to Altrincham in the south. In Manchester, the line runs on-street through the heart of the city centre, for the first time providing rail access to the retail and commercial core, an essential function of any good transport system.

In 1997, 13.7 million journeys were made by Metrolink. The number is continually increasing and studies are being undertaken to examine options for further increasing the capacity of the fleet. If that figure is compared with the 7 million passengers carried on the British Rail lines that Metrolink replaced, the success of the system speaks for itself.

Metrolink appeals to car-owners as well. Studies show that it has replaced 2.6 million car trips on roads in Greater Manchester. The system has brought undoubted benefits to the local economy and has supported efforts to attract new business to the city centre and other town centres in Greater Manchester. It is crucial in the fight against traffic pollution and congestion.

The extension of the Metrolink system is the No. 1 priority. The county now has more developed plans for a full light rail network than any other conurbation and looks forward to its rapid development. Already the first extension to the scheme—the Salford Quays and Eccles extension—is under construction and should be completed by March 2000.

The next priority scheme, which affects my constituency, is the proposed extension to Oldham and Rochdale. I am pleased to see my hon. Friends the Members for Oldham, East and Saddleworth (Mr. Woolas) and for Rochdale (Lorna Fitzsimons) in the Chamber. Conversion of the existing rail route to Metrolink operation will bring about a major transformation, vastly improving reliability and accessibility to the town centres. Predictions are that use of the existing rail line could be increased 10-fold.

Work is continuing on the development of other extensions for the future—for example, to east Manchester and Ashton-under-Lyme, which will provide a substantial boost to the economic and environmental regeneration of east Manchester and Tameside, and provide world-class public transport links for the Commonwealth games. In south Manchester, the Manchester airport link will enhance economic development potential and improve access opportunities to the airport and surrounding area. I shall return to the subject of the airport.

I should also like to take this opportunity to mention the East Lancs rail line in my constituency, which is voluntarily run and managed. It has made a magnificent contribution to tourism in Bury and Rossendale. There is soon to be a Heywood link, which local business is interested in using for freight. The rail line would provide a regular link with the channel tunnel.

The development of a comprehensive bus corridor strategy has been designed to improve the attractiveness and quality of bus travel across the conurbation. Bus priority is essential to improve the reliability of bus services. Until they can be insulated from the effects of traffic congestion, they will never be reliable or attractive enough to entice people out of cars.

I should like to mention another initiative in my constituency. The Middleton traffic initiative is a voluntary transport study group which has produced plans, of which I know the Minister has had sight, to take heavy goods vehicles of more than 17 tonnes out of the town centre. It is important that further transport links do not cause unnecessary harassment or pollution. Traffic congestion caused by HGVs trundling through residential areas is a focus of political and community concern, and must be tackled. That is why the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, headed by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, is crucial.

As part of plans to upgrade the north-west's rail network, a Greater Manchester rail development and investment strategy is to be developed to improve the quality of services and ensure that the passenger transport authority is best placed to exploit the potential of rail in the context of the county's transport strategy.

We cannot debate transport without mentioning the North West Trains company's recent poor performance, which has prompted it to implement a programme of remedial action—known as the recovery plan—which will set a series of targets for rolling stock, driver availability and ticket office opening hours. I hope that it works. The message to Railtrack from this debate and from the House must be that we demand proper investment in the north-west line because it is important to improving the service in the area. The economy would benefit from early investment in north-west links with Eurorail and the channel tunnel. I noticed that a paper on the subject had been put in the Vote Office this morning, although I did not have the opportunity to read it before the debate. Such a link is essential.

Clearly, the task of developing Greater Manchester's public transport network is challenging and will involve securing essential integration of the range of services that passengers and the public generally want to be provided. In taking into account progress to date, including the development of initiatives, such as the integration project and the innovative quality partnership agreement, and proposals to extend Metrolink, which are important to Greater Manchester, I have every confidence that Greater Manchester is well placed to address the Government's objectives of a truly integrated transport network.

Manchester's municipal airport, which I believe is now the second busiest in the United Kingdom, was recently given leave to borrow in order to invest in further and improved transport links in and around the airport. It will be a major player in developing the economic heartland of the north-west and other regions. Such development would be supported by upgrading the west coast main line, rolling stock and subregional links. Further links to the east coast, better trans-Pennine links and links to Scotland and Wales are also desirable. Government support for those necessary transport links would benefit Manchester, Liverpool, Chester and Carlisle, as well as cities in the east, such as Sheffield, Leeds and Hull. Many surrounding towns and large rural areas could also benefit.

This is an important debate for the north-west. The region's economic prosperity depends on its complex transport links. There is no substitute for a properly planned, integrated transport strategy serving commuters, attracting tourists to the north-west's beauty spots—and taking them home again—and, of course, attracting and offering development opportunities to industry. We must plan to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the global economy, and at the same time, protect the environment and our communities. That is what we seek; that is what we hope the Government will support. I shall now end my remarks because I am aware that colleagues have important contributions to make to this debate.

11.15 am

Mr. Stephen Day (Cheadle): I congratulate the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Mr. Dobbin) on bringing this debate before the House. It is important that all colleagues from the area are able to express views. I am grateful to him. I shall make two points, but will be as brief as I can because I recognise that others are waiting to speak.

As joint chairman, along with the hon. Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew), of the all-party group concerned with the west coast main line ever since the group was

[Mr. Stephen Day]

formed, the matter has been dear to my heart for many years, as it has to the many other hon. Members whose constituencies are along the route. I am pleased to say that, after many years of slow progress, we are beginning, dare I say it, to see some light at the end of the tunnel.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): Which one?

Mr. Day: Indeed.

The west coast main line is very important, not only to Greater Manchester, but to constituencies beyond, such as Carlisle. The main body of manufacturing industry in the north-west of England is still largely based in Greater Manchester. I wish those involved in upgrading the line and providing the long overdue and much needed new rolling stock much success. It is a long awaited improvement.

Secondly, I should like to address a matter that is also dear to the hearts of my constituents, except much closer to home, and pertinent to the Government's integrated transport policy. I remember Jim Hacker in "Yes Minister" being desperate to avoid such a policy. It was passed around Westminster because nobody wanted to deal with it. I am still at a loss to understand what an integrated transport policy is. The only result that my constituents have thus far witnessed from this so-called policy, to their great disadvantage, is the cancellation of a bypass—a third of which has been built, but goes nowhere—for which they have waited 30 years.

I accept that the Government are involved in a study of the transport needs of the so-called south-eastern quadrant of Greater Manchester, in which the constituency of Cheadle falls. I wish the Minister luck in the exercise, although to me, it is rather pointless, as I am sure my constituents think, too. Officials in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions know full well of the need to complete the Manchester airport eastern link road. Its title says it all. The central section has been built, but it does not join the airport. How ridiculous!

The central section of the much-needed bypass was built because two shopping cities—one at Handforth Dean and the other at Cheadle Royal—invested money in it. That was fine, although the expectation was that the whole road would be completed. At the public inquiry into the MAELR, and the north-south A34(M), which has already been built, it was projected that, by 2000, the new shopping cities would result in my constituents suffering an extra 20,000 car movements a day. That figure has already been surpassed.

I say to the Minister that my constituents in Bramall, Woodford and Heald Green are suffering massive traffic flows to and from the airport. They feel that, under any integrated transport policy—whatever that may be and, once it is defined, whatever success it may have—they face nothing but increased traffic in the short term. It is absolutely essential at some point—even during the review—for the Minister to come to see for herself.

The people who live in certain roads in Woodford and in Heald Green cannot get their cars out of their driveways. Those roads were never intended to carry the volume of traffic that they are currently suffering. The whole roads system links up with the A6(M) Hazel Grove bypass—the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) will no doubt want to speak on that matter—and with the Poynton bypass, which is part of the eastern section of the Manchester airport eastern link road, for which we have been waiting 30 years and which is also missing.

It was planned that all that would, eventually, link up to the M60 circular route around Manchester, but, south of the M63, there is no direct east-west or south to north-west link to Manchester airport. I thank the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton for raising this matter.

Mr. Jack: Does my hon. Friend think that, because the Government claim to believe in joined-up government, there will be a commitment to the policy that he seeks for his local roads system?

Mr. Day: I hope that my right hon. Friend is right. I am not trying to make any clever points; I am simply appealing on behalf of my constituents, who desperately need the Minister to listen to what is being said. This whole project, if completed—the A6(M), the Poynton bypass and the MAELR linking up to the M60—would provide the strategic road links that the Greater Manchester area desperately needs, for all sorts of reasons.

I make a final plea. If we are to have an integrated transport policy, please will the Government make it clear that—although they want improvements in rail and want to move as much traffic from road to rail as they can, and although everyone sees sense in that—they do not, as a matter of principle, exclude road building from that policy. They should not exclude schemes that have already started, because that would leave nothing but a future of misery for people in the areas that are affected. I hope that the Government will allow my constituents to escape from that misery.

11.23 am

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Mr. Dobbin), not only on securing the debate but on his excellent speech. It covered not only his constituency, but the rest of the north-west.

I shall concentrate on the issues appertaining to Cumbria. We have the most excellent motorway anywhere in the country, and anyone who came over the Lancashire border—Lancashire is a fine county, I am sure of that—would be impressed, as they went through the Howgills and over Shap, by the Pennine hills on one side and the Lake district on the other. They would come to the historic city of Carlisle, which would be on the left as they went towards Scotland.

Although the M6 is excellent, it stops at Carlisle and becomes the A74. For nine miles, it is a dual carriageway all-purpose road. The Scottish Office is building a motorway to the border, but the road called the Cumberland gap is dangerous. People think that they are on the motorway but, all of a sudden, they see farm vehicles, pedestrians and cyclists on the road. That leads to accidents.

The previous Government took the road out of the road proposals, and even scrapped it at one point. I talked to a senior civil servant at the then Department of Transport, who said, "Of course, Mr. Martlew, this road goes nowhere." What he meant was that it went to Scotland,

so it was not the Department's responsibility. Not filling the Cumberland gap would be nonsense, because it is a dangerous road, and completing it would mean that we would have a motorway link from Brighton on the south coast to Stirling. We must finish that nine-mile stretch to give us a first-class road on the west side of the country.

I understand that the Government have agreed that we should continue to consider upgrading the road to motorway standard, for at least the next three months. I am pleased about that. I accept that the Government have to make some savings on road building—everyone accepts that we cannot build roads in the way that we have previously—but we must continue with this road.

Cumbria county council, of which I was a member, is concerned about the detrunking of the A590, the A595 and the A7. I understand the logic behind the Government's thinking on detrunking, which is to give local authorities more influence and more power. There is concern over whether the money will come to the local authority with detrunking, but I am sure that it can. The county council's real concern is the reduction in a road's status following detrunking. These areas are trying to attract inward investment, and they are afraid that that will send the wrong message to organisations. Perhaps my hon. Friend the Minister can reassure us on that issue.

The A66 is not in my constituency, but in that of the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean). There is no doubt, however, that the village of Temple Sowerby needs a bypass. Every year there is carnage on that stretch of the road. The previous Government failed to provide a bypass for that stretch of the A66; I hope that this Government will be able to do so.

In my constituency of Carlisle we are not very keen on building new roads. Hon. Members should consider our record over the past 50 years: we built half a ring road, but we realised that building the road was the wrong decision so we cancelled the rest of it. However, we need a north-west bypass. I understand that it may be built under a private finance initiative scheme. The vast majority of my constituents will welcome that, although certain individuals are concerned that the road may go through the corner of a nature reserve. My opinion is that the environmental problems created by not completing the bypass would be much greater than those that we will have if building goes on to the fringe of the nature reserve.

The hon. Member for Cheadle (Mr. Day)—who sits across the way and is co-chairman of the west coast main line all-party group—has mentioned some of the points relating to the west coast main line that we have debated. We do not get a good service on Virgin Trains, but I have travelled with it seven times this year and—touch wood—have never been late. It may be that the service is getting better, but it may be that I have been lucky. We have concerns—*[Interruption.]* From the noise made by hon. Members, I suspect that I have been lucky.

We are concerned that Railtrack is starting to downgrade the upgrade and will do it on the cheap. I hope that that is not the case, because it would affect the high-speed tilting trains that are due to be used on the west coast main line very soon. We are also worried about the point made in *The Guardian* recently about considerable disruption in the vicinity of Euston station because of the upgrade. That will obviously cause problems for residents.

There has been talk about a public inquiry. A public inquiry, as we understand it, would be a disaster for the west coast main line. It would mean years and years of delay and the economy of the north-west and Scotland could not stand that problem.

My hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton did not have an opportunity to mention the Select Committee document on regional Eurostar services, which is now in the Vote Office. My hon. Friend the Minister may have seen it. According to the first sentence, the regions have been cheated. The document goes on to say that the House gave permission for the construction of the channel tunnel in the belief that all the regions would benefit from it. We have seen no benefit. We need an assurance from the Government—perhaps not today—that the regions will have direct access to Europe through Eurostar services on the west coast.

A Railtrack document that I saw recently said that there were plans to provide Eurostar services between Glasgow and Edinburgh and on the east coast. That would not satisfy hon. Members who are in the Chamber today. I understand that there are also safety problems with east coast services, but that west coast services could be up and running soon. I hope that the Minister will address the difficulties.

I welcome the debate, and hope that the present Government will make good what went wrong under the last. We have reasonable communications in Cumbria, but they could be better. We have a particular problem with the roads that go from west Cumbria to eastern England, and we hope that the Government will put things right.

11.31 am

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): I thank the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mr. Day) for breaking ground for me by raising some of the issues that I want to put to the Minister. Our constituencies, on the south-eastern side of Greater Manchester, experience problems caused not just by congestion and commuters, but by renewed economic growth.

Traffic flows were mentioned by both the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Mr. Dobbin) and the hon. Member for Cheadle. Manchester airport is expanding rapidly; it is clearly very successful, and it is planned to become even more successful with the opening of the second runway by 2005. It is anticipated that the number of passengers travelling to and from the airport will increase from 16 million to 30 million, and that there will an additional 30,000 jobs in and around it.

A sensible strategy has been devised to divert as many passengers and workers as is feasible to public transport: the target is 25 per cent., and a vigorous start has been made. It is, however, a challenging target, which will be difficult to achieve. The development of the Metrolink, the opening of the southern link to the airport railway station and the provision of many new rail and coach services to various parts of the country will all help.

Let me make a constituency plea. Even if all the targets are met, as I hope they will be, an extra 8 million passengers will be travelling by road to the airport following its expansion. If the 25 per cent. target is achieved, 22,000 of the 30,000 extra jobs will still be filled by people travelling by road. According to my calculations—I shall be interested to hear whether the

[Mr. Andrew Stunell]

Minister thinks differently—that means an extra 70,000 road trips per day in and out of the airport and the surrounding area.

As well as the severe congestion which—as the hon. Member for Cheadle pointed out—already exists, the opening of the second runway and the economic regeneration of the area will lead to an extra 70,000 road trips per day, even if the public transport strategy works to a T. Those of us who represent communities to the east of the airport—Hazel Grove, Bredbury and Romiley, for instance—face the prospect not just of passengers from our area and people with jobs at the airport travelling to it, but people whose homes are further to the east in Oldham, Tameside or even Sheffield using the conventional road system to filter through my area and that of the hon. Member for Cheadle and reach the airport.

In an intervention, the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) hinted at the need for not just joined-up thinking, but joined-up roads to make the connection to the airport. This will allow the large majority of people who, according to any projection, will be using the road system to do so without destroying the local communities and environment.

In the past, Governments have recognised some of the needs. There are dotted lines on maps. Very shortly, the opening of the M60 link around the east side of Greater Manchester will provide a direct route from the M62 around the east of Manchester to the airport and the national motorway network on the west side of England. There is just one problem—the M60, as it passes through Stockport where for part of its length it has two lanes. It is already heavily congested during commuting times, and people use alternative routes, all of which run through my constituency. I am faced with the opening of a new motorway link from the M62 which points straight at the heart of my constituency, and, on the other side, I am faced with the Manchester airport eastern link road, which is partly finished and which also points straight at the heart of my constituency. In the middle is my constituency, with conventional, suburban, built-up roads that are already heavily congested, and will shortly experience the onslaught of new airport passengers and workers.

Mr. Day: Is it not important for the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to accede to the requests that I understand will be made by both Stockport and Macclesfield borough councils for the western and eastern sections of the Manchester airport eastern link road, the Poynton bypass and the Hazel Grove bypass—the A6M—to remain a protected line of route?

Mr. Stunell: I agree. In fact, last Thursday Stockport metropolitan borough council decided to make that specific recommendation as part of its submission to the Minister. I have seen Lord Whitty—I know that the hon. Member for Cheadle has done the same—and talked to him about, in particular, the projected multi-modal study of the south-east quadrant of Greater Manchester, a tremendous mouthful. I gather that the study is due to start in the spring, and that it will take two years to produce a report. Perhaps the Minister will confirm that. I do not know how long it will take to implement the report, but there will probably be considerably more delay before my constituents are relieved of their problems.

When I spoke to Lord Whitty, he gave me the clear impression that discussions would take place with local councils about the criteria for the study, and that they would have opportunities to be consulted and to participate. I have, however, heard from Stockport council the worrying suggestion that consultation on the criteria has not taken place, and is not projected to take place. Can the Minister assure me that it will?

Let me briefly make two points that were also made by the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton, and with which I entirely agree. One relates to the difficulties that First North West Trains seems to be having in providing efficient and effective commuter services for my constituents and, no doubt, his. I hope that the Minister will keep a sharp eye on the franchise of that company, as I know that the passenger transport authority is doing, to ensure that it performs to the level that it is required to do by its franchise, and can reasonably be expected to do.

I pick up the point that was made by the hon. Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) relating to the Eurostar link. Last autumn, I wrote to the Minister and raised the issue of when Virgin's request to run Eurostar services would be considered. I understand that a review is going on. I had the impression that that would have reached a conclusion and that an announcement would have been made before Christmas. Unless I have missed it, I do not think that it has happened yet. Again, I ask the Minister whether that straightforward, simple step to improve our links with Europe and the rest of the world can be given an urgent push forward.

11.40 am

Mr. Graham Stringer (Manchester, Blackley): I declare some old interests in transport. For a long period—13 years—I was a paid director of the Manchester Ship Canal Company and of Manchester Ship Canal Development, which eventually became a wholly owned subsidiary of Peel Holdings, which now owns Liverpool airport. I spent 13 years as a director of Manchester airport and 11 years as a member of the Greater Manchester passenger transport authority.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Mr. Dobbin) on securing the debate and on the comprehensive review that he gave of transport in Greater Manchester and the north-west.

On the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) made about Eurostar, I had the difficult choice of whether to come to the debate, or to go to the press conference to launch the report on Eurostar by the Transport Sub-Committee of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs. It is a fascinating report and I commend it to all hon. Members who are present. It says simply that the regions were conned during the debate on investment in the channel tunnel into believing that there would be some benefit to the regions from having regional rail services.

When we examined the witnesses, including witnesses from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, we found not only that there is no benefit at the moment because we do not have Euro regional rail services to Manchester, Glasgow and Edinburgh, but that the witnesses did not know what the impact of the channel tunnel on current links was; nor could they project what the impact might be if such regional rail services started.

My guess is that, because of all the investment in the south-east, the effect of the channel tunnel has been negative on the regional economies, but no one knows because the work has not been done. It should be.

At present, hundreds of millions of pounds worth of Eurostar regional rolling stock is kept in the sidings doing nothing. There is a simple choice for the Government; either they take up Virgin's offer to run the services at no cost to the taxpayer—one can be sceptical about that; not everything that Virgin promises comes into being—or there needs to be a subsidy.

The decision that the Government came to in sorting out London and Continental's financial mess and in agreeing the deal that will complete the channel tunnel link into London has meant that that service cannot subsidise the regions, so either there needs to be a small subsidy, or a commercial operator needs to be put in place that will carry through the services.

That would benefit the regions, particularly if we allowed that service to carry passengers who were not going all the way. It would bring immediate benefit for those people travelling from the regions just into London or somewhere beyond.

Another aspect of transport in the north-west that I want to talk about is airport and aviation policy. I start with two facts. In 1996, 10 million passengers from the north of England travelled on international scheduled services. Of those 10 million passengers, 4 million—four out of every 10—were forced into the south-east system to make connections.

We do not know how many of those intercontinental passengers did not go into the south-east, did not catch their intercontinental flight from this country, but chose Schipol, Frankfurt, Paris, Copenhagen or another European hub. The statistics would be worse if we could get that information. The money associated with those flights was lost.

Another fact illustrates how we could benefit if those passengers used regional airports, whether it be Manchester or Liverpool. About three years ago, a comparative study was undertaken of the airports at Schipol and Manchester. It showed that, if we looked at the economy immediately surrounding Schipol and at the north-west economy, Manchester airport—we could throw in Liverpool airport for these purposes too—was carrying only about a third of the passengers that Schipol airport was carrying. That fact ties in neatly with the fact that many passengers have been forced into the south-east system and probably into other European hubs.

What can we do about that? I want to be positive; it was slightly negative to start off with the failure of Eurostar to benefit the regions. What can we do to improve the position of the assets of the north-west, which Manchester and Liverpool airports certainly are?

Two relatively simple things can be done to enable business and leisure passengers who want to travel from the north-west and do not particularly want to change planes in London to do so. First, the previous Government declared unilaterally an open-skies policy with America, so that American planes could fly in and take passengers. For regional airports, again, unilaterally, we should declare an open-skies policy—we have done it partially—so that foreign carriers can fly in and pick up passengers.

For sensible commercial reasons, British carriers want a hub in the south-east and it is in their interests to concentrate on the south-east. If they want to do that, that is entirely justified. We should however give passengers the right to get on to those carriers that want to fly in and out of regional airports. There would be an immediate benefit. When a previous Minister with responsibility for transport, the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Sir B. Mawhinney), agreed an open-skies policy with North America for the regions, there was, over a fairly short period, a gradual, but immediate increase in the number of flights by American carriers into Manchester airport.

The second thing involves a complicated legal issue and would need legislation. Manchester airport is a highly profitable company; now that Liverpool airport is owned by a positive, commercially active private company, things have improved enormously compared with the time when British Aerospace was in control. Manchester airport has one of the best profits to capital employed ratios of any company in the private or public sector, but because, effectively, it is only allowed to do those things that its owners are allowed to do by law—10 authorities own it—it cannot take full advantage of commercial partnership arrangements, for example, with Liverpool.

One of the first things that the Deputy Prime Minister did when he took up his post was to participate in the announcement by Manchester and Liverpool airports that they wanted to co-operate. Those airports may want to buy other airports, to go into joint marketing ventures, and to do what the rest of the transport industry is doing: amalgamating with bus and train companies. Certainly the separation that was there five years ago is no more. To do that, there has to be a change in the vires that freeze up Manchester airport and any similar airport, so that we can get the benefit of those changes in the law.

The old solution of the previous Government, which was that, if there is a problem, privatise it, would be completely wrong. Manchester airport would not be the success it is today had it been privatised 20 years ago. I am not saying that some privatisations have not been successful—they have—but the necessary long-term view of infrastructure investment would not have happened had there been short-term decisions.

Those are the solutions. I was heartened to hear that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister told the Select Committee that he had long advocated that northern airports should not be disadvantaged because of the interests of southern airports such as Heathrow. I take that to mean that he understands that there has to be an uncoupling of the negotiations around British Airways and Heathrow and access to Heathrow in the interests of the northern airports. If that happens, we will see huge benefits for the north-west, with the airports working together trying to benefit the entire region in a new legal framework.

There is a great deal of controversy about roads. Roads can bring economic advantages and disadvantages—we do not always know. They can take jobs away as easily as they can provide them. That is true of many other forms of transport investment, but it is not true of airports. There is a straight correlation between the number of passengers using an airport and the jobs created. In virtually every airport that has ever been studied in western economies—whether it is northern Europe or western Europe—for every 1 million passengers who fly through the airport about 1,000 jobs are created on site and about 1,000 are created in related industries close by. That is 2,000 jobs without saying anything about what is induced in the local economy because the business flier is able to fly in and

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out and invest. A complicated economic analysis is involved. There is no doubt that the growth of those airports is the fundamental driver of the north-west economy in the same way as cotton was important 200 years ago and engineering was important about 50 or 100 years ago. I hope that we can see some movement to support the growth of those airports.

11.52 am

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): The comments of the hon. Member for Manchester, Blackley (Mr. Stringer) about the importance of transport to the vibrancy of the north-west economy reflect what many hon. Members have said in their contributions. The comments so far represent many of the frustrations that we all feel when we are serving the interests of our constituents and trying to put right transport issues, which are vital if we are to achieve our common goal of wanting to see the north-west prosper in the future.

I have heard the M6 mentioned during the debate. I know that work is being undertaken to look at some of the remaining key pinch points on that route. To improve access to the north-west, either by car or lorry, the M6 must be upgraded in parts of the north-west, but not, I hasten to add, near Carlisle. At times, the road appears to be impassable. Its importance cannot be underrated and we should not forget it.

Many hon. Members have commented on the integration of transport. That is an aspiration to which we would all adhere. The ease with which one can move from one mode of transport to another is important, particularly if we are to make public transport a real option for car users. Preston, part of which is in my constituency, illustrates precisely some of the difficulties we face. The rail network is to the west of the town and the bus depot is sited at the north-east of the town. The idea of smooth integration such as that witnessed in, for example, Hammersmith in London, where one can go straight from the bus into the tube system, will remain a dream for Preston. If we are to address the traffic problems in Preston and on the Fylde coast and persuade people to use the railways and buses, that type of integration is the physical solution to which we must aspire. Inevitably, there will be further debates reflecting on that point.

I hope that the Minister might be able to say something about the possibility of eventually extending the M65 all the way to Yorkshire. The developments that have taken place are of enormous benefit but, as other colleagues have observed, although natural routeways exist there are gaps in the system. We are all acutely aware of the pressures on the M62, particularly at peak times, in linking that important north-west corridor to the ports on the east coast.

I endorse what many hon. Members have said about Manchester airport. On public transport, there is still a major education job to be done if we are to alert people to the real benefits of the alternative. Equally, providers must be educated to concentrate on quality issues. In many cases it is difficult to persuade car drivers, including me, out of their cars and on to buses. They realise that the bus will not provide them with the same degree of comfort as they are used to enjoying in their cars. There are bus designs now that are meeting that problem, and public transport providers should reflect on that.

I want to concentrate on a much more localised issue. I am delighted to see the hon. Members for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) and for West Lancashire (Mr. Pickthall) in their places because I suspect that they will also want to talk about moss roads. Before people immediately leap to the conclusion that those are some sort of ancient green-covered routeway in the north-west, I shall explain that moss roads are the vernacular expression for a vital series of routeways that pass through the constituencies of Lancaster and Wyre—particularly the Wyre area—West Lancashire and my constituency of Fylde.

Recently, councillor Richard Toon, who looks after transport in Lancashire, made some comments to the local press under the heading:

"Crumbling roads face being shut".

The fact that I am raising this issue and that other hon. Members may also choose to do so is an illustration of how long, under the previous Government and this Government, we have been making representations about the very special problems faced by this rural network of roads.

My research has shown that this type of road exists only in Norfolk, Lincolnshire and Lancashire. In correspondence to me recently, the Minister tried to suggest that the roads were similar to those being affected by subsidence in mining areas. I acknowledge that there may be a special case in those instances, but there are special factors over and above the normal wear and tear that affect the rural network of moss roads.

One of the problems is that they are built on a foundation of peat and sometimes a combination of peat and sand. That oxidises because of the weather and time and, eventually, the roads are left sitting feet out of the ground while the land around them subsides. The substructure of the road is then incapable of supporting the carriageway. The next stage is the creation of what I would describe as a funicular railway effect. The roads go up and down and break up and the routeway is in danger of being destroyed. Long periods of dry weather can have a bad effect on the routeways, which are obviously beyond the control of man given the current technology.

In May last year the county council estimated that the cost of putting the roads right was about £32.6 million. The annual safety and maintenance figures alone amount to £400,000. That figure was further revised when the county's environment director noted that a sum total of £5.3 million had been spent on those routeways in the past seven years, but that they simply were not able to keep up with the problems. The new estimate for reconstructing that vital rural network of roads is now £43.5 million. Councillor Toon made what I thought was a telling comment when he said that

"simply patching them up is like throwing money away because they deteriorate at an enormous rate."

That lies at the heart of this problem.

In total, we are looking at 47.5 km of this vital rural routeway in Lancashire, of which 22 km are in a severely distressed condition. In correspondence with me, the Minister attempted to argue that Lancashire should, like everywhere else, like it or lump it and use the money allocated to it under the standard spending assessment to look after the routeways. I am sure that the Minister understands that it is well beyond the county council's ability to look after the roads within the headroom given

by the SSA. The construction of the general formula does not allow flexibility in recognition of such specialised local conditions. The Minister mentioned mining subsidence. That is also a special condition. Sometimes our nationally agreed formulae are too inflexible to recognise local problems. I am confident that the Government will be sympathetic to my arguments, particularly in the light of their stated intention to produce a new rural White Paper, one of the key themes of which will no doubt be the maintenance of good transport links in rural areas.

I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre—I call him my hon. Friend in this context because we work closely together on rural matters—will want to say something about the problems in his constituency if he is called, because I recognise that they are even greater than those in my constituency. The county's environment directorate has made it clear that the moss roads in Wyre, West Lancashire and Fylde are of the highest priority.

I should like to put on record my appreciation for the diligent way in which Mr. Graham Harding has represented the interests of moss roads to hon Members. In a letter to me on 22 May last year, he said:

"Those sections of the moss roads that have had major schemes in the last 10 years are deteriorating to such an extent that compared with 'normal' roads they would be considered to have no residual life and unsafe. The need for work on the moss roads is beyond what could be regarded as normal maintenance and should be regarded as 'small improvements' owing to the need to completely remove the moss road foundations of the existing carriageway and reconstruct these roads on the existing alignment."

He goes on to point out that research is being undertaken on other similar road problems. He says:

"It is my understanding that the Highways Agency is looking for sites for recycling trials using secondary aggregates and it is a pity that, whilst an ideal site in the moss roads is also available the different sources of funding mean that it is not able to be pursued."

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his positive comments. Does he agree that, while reconstruction of the moss roads is fundamental to the rural economy and the life of the rural community, the most important issue is road safety? He will be aware of an incident that happened two weeks ago yesterday in which some of his constituents may have been involved. A double-decker bus carrying 30 schoolchildren tipped over on one of the moss roads. Fortunately, it was saved by a telegraph pole, preventing serious injury to any of the children. Does he regard that as a warning to us all about the grievous consequences of not investing properly in the work?

Mr. Jack: I am grateful for that telling point. The mention of a busload of children shows the vital contribution that the network of rural roads plays in linking sometimes far-flung villages and those involved in farming and horticulture. If the Minister visits the north-west, it would be to her advantage if her officials could carve out a few moments for her to travel along such roads. Once she has seen them, understood their importance as transport links for rural Lancashire and witnessed how dangerous they are when they start to deteriorate, the point will be made.

The moss roads are a special case. This is special pleading. However, as the Minister has seen, there is agreement across the House that something must be done, even if in the first instance it is research by the Department into techniques to stabilise the roads and stop their deterioration. That would at least be a positive start to a programme to address that small but vital problem for many important parts of rural Lancashire.

12.5 pm

Mr. Derek Twigg (Halton): I realise that time is tight, so I shall cut what would have been a 10-minute speech to five minutes. I shall do my best to get as much in as possible.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Mr. Dobbin) for securing the debate and congratulate him on his excellent speech. Transport links in the north-west are fundamental to our economy and our social fabric. The north-west has the second largest economy in the country. I welcome the Government's integrated transport strategy. The proposals are welcome in my constituency and throughout the north-west.

It would be a surprise if I did not speak about Halton. Many people accuse me of seeing it as the centre of the universe. There are plenty of important transport links in my constituency, including the Manchester ship canal, the M56, the M62, the major Mersey crossing, and the Bridgewater canal, with Liverpool airport on our doorstep. I shall focus on the Runcorn-Widnes bridge, which is the major transport issue in my constituency and in the Cheshire and Merseyside sub-region. My hon. Friend the Minister is well aware of the problems.

The crossing was built in 1961 and is taking far more traffic than it was designed for. It is one of the landmarks of the north-west. When it is lit up at night it is one of the finest sights around. However, in addition to the 17 per cent. traffic increase since 1991, it has major structural and maintenance problems. I am glad that the Government have recognised some of those and increased the amount that Halton borough council can spend on maintenance and improvements to the bridge.

The bridge is important for transport in the north-west and for the economy in Cheshire and Merseyside. Building a second crossing would create between 5,000 and 5,500 jobs and improve the local economy. The current bridge cannot cope. I am sure that our integrated transport policy will be successful, but it will not solve the capacity problems. There are three options—an eastern crossing, a western crossing and a central crossing. All have their merits and costs. We are trying to find out from the regional development association and the Government which would be the best option.

I favour the eastern crossing. It is not the most expensive, it would have the least environmental impact and it would link with the Runcorn busway. It is not possible to shut off one lane on either side of the current four-lane bridge to use as a busway. That would cause chaos in the region and on the M6. Such a suggestion would be nonsense. However, an eastern crossing would fit in nicely with a busway, which could be extended to Widnes and would sit well with the Government's integrated transport strategy.

The Runcorn busway is unique. It is regarded throughout Europe and the world as an example of how a busway could be. It covers 22 km around Runcorn, with housing, shops and businesses all close to it. It was intended to have a 50:50 split between public and private transport, but in reality only about 20 per cent. of work

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trips are made by bus. Improvements are needed in its structure and its environment. It needs safer bus stops and bus stations and must be made more attractive.

Halton Transport is one of the few municipally owned bus companies that makes a profit, providing modern, safe transport. It is an example of how the public sector can be a commercial success while providing an important public service.

The west coast main line passes through my constituency, with trains stopping at Runcorn station. The station is crucial to the economy in my area and the north-west generally. Virgin Trains has made a start and, in all fairness, has made some improvements, but it is still a long way from delivering the service that is needed. Putting up the prices and throwing in a few cheese croissants and a couple of drinks is not what I call an improved public service; but we shall see.

I have a letter from a company in my area about ticket pricing and the 9 o'clock deadline. The letter asks how the company's staff can be encouraged to use public transport rather than a car to go to London, when they face exorbitant prices for train travel, especially with the deadline at 9 o'clock, which is not the busiest time on the way back from London.

Runcorn station, which is well used, needs refurbishment, and I believe that there are plans for that. Widnes station is famous because Paul Simon wrote "Homeward Bound" on it; I do not know whether that was because in the 1960s Widnes reminded him of his home town or because he wanted to get away from it, but we have a little bit of faith.

Manchester airport has been discussed, and we should not forget Liverpool airport. It is important to develop links between the two. Liverpool is the fastest-growing regional airport in the country and provides an awful lot of jobs. As my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Blackley (Mr. Stringer) said, the expansion can produce a guaranteed 1,000 extra jobs. The airport has an environmental as well as an economic impact on my constituency, but it is a very important employer.

Transport is crucial for the improvement of the economy in the north-west, including my area and Merseyside and Cheshire. I am positive that the Government's approach will ensure success.

12.11 pm

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): I congratulate the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Mr. Dobbin) on securing this important debate, which has been very constructive. My appearance at the Dispatch Box should not be taken as lending any credence whatever to rumours that have been circulating recently in the press; it is my first appearance and could easily be my last. This issue is vital for the north-west and I am delighted to be here to represent Her Majesty's Opposition on a matter of such importance to our region.

Both Government and Opposition Members have spoken eloquently in support of projects and improvements that are vital to our regional economy and to our constituents' quality of life. Our region's prosperity has been built on trade; without effective transport links that trade and that prosperity will die.

There has been good news over the years, and we should not forget that; it is easy in a debate such as this to list only the problems. The good news includes the success of the port of Liverpool in recent years. Many people forget that the port of Manchester still handles 9 million tonnes of freight per annum. The Metrolink has already been referred to, first by the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton.

Many hon. Members have mentioned the west coast main line; decades of underinvestment under public ownership have given way to some hopeful signs of major investment and a prospect of serious improvement. Billions of pounds of private money are going into upgrading the track and Virgin Trains is spending £1.3 billion on new trains. There is already more freight on the railways than in the dark days when British Rail was even found on occasion to be persuading companies not to move freight by rail, because it found it inconvenient to handle it.

The hon. Member for Manchester, Blackley (Mr. Stringer) referred especially knowledgably to Manchester airport. It is a great success story for the region and is vital to the development of the regional economy. It has been said that the airport is set to double its number of passengers and of employees, and it is essential that it should be allowed to thrive and prosper.

There are, however, real problems for the region. Transport links must be improved for the benefit of tourism and the area's service industries, as well as the manufacturing sector, which has perhaps the more obvious need. The Engineering and Marine Training Authority has estimated that north-west engineering companies are the least likely to export: 36 per cent. against a national average of 45 per cent. That must be improved if we are to increase our region's prosperity, and we need improved transport links to do that, not only within the north-west but on the essential routes linking us with other parts of the United Kingdom.

The north-west is important not only in itself but as part of a transport link to Scotland, as the hon. Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) said, and to Northern Ireland. Transport links across the north-west to the Irish sea ports are vital if we are to have lasting peace in Northern Ireland.

Much of the north-west's strategic transport system is choked and congested. The new Government have increased fuel duty, which was already high, and will take £9 billion more from motorists in this Parliament, but the roads programme has been slashed and investment in public transport is frozen. The Deputy Prime Minister recently repeated projections that traffic will grow by a third in the next 20 years, and meanwhile people are paying dearly for the privilege of sitting in queues on the M6.

Road signs on the M60 and connecting roads are scruffy and illegible and vital road improvements have been cancelled or kicked into the long grass for further studies. The old, transparent cost-benefit analysis has been cast aside in favour of choices that often appear inconsistent and irrational. Some very important road schemes have been cut, including the improvement of junctions 12 to 18 on the M60 and junction 6 of the M62.

The A6(M) Stockport bypass was referred to earlier, and the A555 Poynton bypass is crucial to the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mr. Day).

Perhaps the most important of all is the improvement and completion of the Manchester airport eastern and western link roads. The hon. Member for Carlisle mentioned the A590 in Cumbria, which is also of key concern to my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins).

Studies have been ordered into necessary road schemes and into M6 capacity problems. The Minister does not need studies to know about those problems.

Mr. Dawson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Brady: I would very much like to, but I am afraid that I have very little time, as I am keen to leave time for the Minister to respond.

To study the capacity constraints on the M6 one needs merely to drive up it and experience the bottlenecks at numerous points. There is also a study into congestion in the south-east quadrant of Manchester. Improvements are urgently needed and should be started without delay. The M6 was designed to carry between 70,000 and 80,000 vehicles a day but it is already carrying more than 140,000. As 90 per cent. of exports from the north-west travel through the west midlands, that transport link must be improved for the health of our economy.

I could not conclude my remarks without referring to the Birmingham northern relief road, which is essential not only to the north-west but to the west midlands. It has been termed the single most important strategic highway in the United Kingdom, and I endorse that. These congestion problems must be tackled as a matter of urgency.

Several hon. Members mentioned the airport link roads. They are of great importance to the local communities in Bramhall, Poynton, Woodford, Heald Green and Hazel Grove, as well as to the economy of Manchester and the north-west generally. Without a proper infrastructure providing links to the airport at a time of rapid growth, the region's economic development will be hindered. It is essential that the road schemes should be completed.

The Minister has been asked many questions, and I will remind her of one or two. The Birmingham northern relief road is perhaps the most important strategic link for our region. Further improvements are needed along the M6, and not only on the section leading up to Carlisle and on to Scotland; for many, indeed all, of us, it is perhaps even more important that the bottlenecks all along the M6 are tackled. The road links to the airport—without which the airport's growth and development will be a problem and a hindrance to local communities, rather than a benefit—have been mentioned. Clarity in the proposed arrangements for the privatisation of National Air Traffic Services would be helpful, and we need proper safety guarantees at a time when the airport may be disrupted by safety concerns.

As a Member who represents the north-west, I would be delighted to continue raising concerns about the region. However, I am conscious of the desire of all Members to hear the Minister's response, to which I look forward as well.

12.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Glenda Jackson): I congratulate the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) on his first appearance at the Dispatch Box—although I regret that his appearance did not confirm some of the stories circulating in the press. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Mr. Dobbin) on obtaining this important debate. I feel I should declare an interest, as I was born and raised in the north-west.

All hon. Members have underlined the importance of transport—and particularly integrated transport systems—to employment, regeneration and the protection of our environment. Many issues have been raised, not least the west coast main line, Eurostar services and regional airports. The west coast main line was referred to by my hon. Friends the Members for Heywood and Middleton and for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew), and the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mr. Day).

Railtrack has announced a £1.35 billion improvement of the west coast main line as part of the modernisation process. I hope that I can reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle, who has been reading stories about modernisation being done on the cheap, that I will certainly raise his concerns with the Health and Safety Executive. There can be no reduction in or infringement of the safety requirements on our railways.

Eurostar was referred to by several hon. Members, in particular by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Blackley (Mr. Stringer). My hon. Friend serves on the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, and the Government welcome the Committee's recent report. We intend to consider carefully its recommendations and, of course, we will publish a full response in due course.

We expect the report to contain the criteria for the review that we are commissioning on Eurostar regional services. The Government believe—as my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has made clear on many occasions—that people living beyond London should have convenient and effective access to the channel tunnel rail services. That is why we are undertaking an independent review of those services, and we will make further announcements soon on that issue of national importance.

What has come out of this morning's debate is the remarkable difference between the approach of the Government to the issues of transport and integration and the lamentable failures of the previous Administration. Much has been expressed by hon. Members on both sides of the House about the particular difficulties within their constituencies—a point made by the hon. Members for Cheadle and for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell). They referred to the unbearable congestion and inevitable pollution that impacts upon their constituents because of the complete failure of the previous Administration, over 18 years, to begin to tackle the difficulties caused by the belief that the solution to all our transport difficulties was the old predict-and-provide system. They refused to acknowledge the fact that improving roads exclusively simply increased traffic.

[Ms Glenda Jackson]

The Government have moved markedly away from that benighted approach, and that is the reason for our integrated transport strategy. However, it is not just a matter of policy. We are giving practical funding to local authorities to ensure that their local transport plans can bring into play the necessary integration to ensure that we make the best possible use of existing infrastructure, and begin to move away from the idea that only one form of transport infrastructure can possibly meet this nation's economic and environmental needs.

We have envisaged an important planning and co-ordinating role at a regional level—for all regions. We have proposed that regional planning guidance should include a regional transport strategy. That will be a key task for a north-west regional assembly. The strategy will set out regional priorities for transport investment, including the role of trunk and local roads.

At this point, I confirm to my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle that detrunking is by no means equivalent to demoting. Local authorities have been arguing for a considerable time that they would like to take on the responsibility for those roads, and that is the subject of discussions. My hon. Friend also referred to finance, and we envisage a time when the whole life-costs of a road will be considered during the detrunking process.

Another recurring theme of the debate this morning was the importance of regional air services—a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley. He will be aware that the Government have announced a series of regional air studies—the fourth of these, which will examine regional air services in the north-east, the north-west and York and Humberside, will be announced shortly. He was right—as were other hon. Members—about the importance of our airports, but even more importantly, the importance of surface access to them; a point made by the hon. Member for Hazel Grove.

We are asking regions to work together, and we must get away from the idea that local authorities must argue exclusively for their own concerns, because those can impact upon contingent local authorities. Much good work, however, has been done in the north-west.

Mr. Day: During the review of transport needs in the south-east quadrant of Greater Manchester, would the Minister be willing to visit the problem areas that have been identified in the debate? Will the requests from Macclesfield borough council and Stockport borough council for protection of the line of route of the roads referred to in the debate be looked upon favourably?

Ms Jackson: In terms of my possible visit to the sites, that is highly unlikely in the immediate to short term, but I will write to the hon. Gentleman on both of those issues.

It will be important for a regional strategy to take account of all the transport studies that have been referred in the debate when considering an integrated transport strategy for the region. That is very much the thrust of our White Paper. We must get away from the blind wisdom that said that we could build roads to meet ever-growing demand. We must have longer-term, sustainable solutions, and that is the message we are receiving from the travelling public. That was the clear message from the extensive consultation that we undertook prior to publishing our White Paper.

We must reduce dependency on the car, and switch to more sustainable transport modes—train, bus, cycling, walking. Our aim is to increase choice for all by improving alternative modes of transport to secure sustainable mobility. Emphasis is very much on a package of measures. There is no big idea to solve all the problems of transport and the environment—the problems are complex. That was a recurring theme of all the speeches that we have heard. A range of different solutions tailored to local circumstances will be needed—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. We must move on to the next debate.

Highcliffe School

12.30 pm

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): Originally, I had intended to use this debate to raise the case of my constituent Miss Sujata Halder and her application for exceptional leave to remain in the United Kingdom. However, as soon as my success in the ballot became known, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), invited me to a meeting at the Home Office.

At that meeting, which was held last Thursday, we discussed the case, and the Under-Secretary promised to reconsider it. On Monday afternoon, the Home Secretary and the Under-Secretary finally decided to exercise their discretion in favour of my constituent and to allow her to remain in this country. I am most grateful to the Home Secretary and the Under-Secretary for having addressed the arguments that I raised on behalf of Miss Halder and for ensuring that justice is done in her case.

I am also grateful to the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), who is present this afternoon. His agreement to allow me to change the subject of the debate has given me the opportunity to raise the matter of the funding of Highcliffe comprehensive grant-maintained school. I hope that the Minister will be as good a listener as his Home Office colleagues.

Highcliffe comprehensive is the only grant-maintained secondary school in the ancient borough of Christchurch. Following a decision by the previous Government, it now has a sixth form, which it operates on a collaborative basis with two other Christchurch secondary schools—the Grange and Twynham. I am fortunate in having some excellent schools in my constituency, but none has a better academic record than Highcliffe, which came top in Dorset in the 1998 secondary school performance tables published on 1 December. It is a recognised centre of educational excellence and attracts more pupils than it can accommodate, many of them from Hampshire.

To mention Hampshire is to remind the Minister that no debate about schools in my constituency would be complete without another reference to the gross injustice and unfairness of the Government's decision not to alter the area cost adjustment element of the methodology for grant distribution. That means, for example, that another fine secondary school in my constituency—Ferndown upper school—receives £300,000 a year less than it would if it were situated a few miles down the road in Hampshire. The same is true for the schools in Christchurch.

The Government have decided to freeze the methodology for three years, but I can assure the Minister that the argument will not go away, as the feeling of great injustice about the matter persists in my constituency. That sense of injustice is evident in a letter that was sent to the Prime Minister on 20 January by Dr. Howard, the headmaster at Ferndown upper school. I shall not read the letter in full, but Dr. Howard states:

"the anomalies of the present system, as here on the Dorset-Hampshire border, are so gross that they cry out for change . . . Many of us had hoped in 1997, with a new administration in power, that we would also see the practical application of a commitment to fairness and justice. We are now sadly disappointed."

I hope that the Minister will listen again to the matters raised in that letter.

Highcliffe school has benefited from its grant-maintained status, which it attained in 1992–93. Since then, the school's governors have acted in what they consider to be a prudent and efficient manner and have used all the funds at their disposal for the benefit of pupils. With the Government's decision to abolish grant-maintained status, Highcliffe has opted for foundation status from later this year. One of the matters that I hope that the Minister will deal with in this short debate is the funding consequence for the school of that change of status. It is far from clear what will happen in the next financial year, but the school fears that it may lose as much as £40,000.

The matter is causing much concern. The consultation paper preceding the Government's legislation to abolish grant-maintained schools stated:

"The aim should be to level up rather than down, moving all schools towards the level of school budget management currently applying in the GM sector, while ensuring that key services which can only be provided by the LEA . . . are properly resourced."

In February last year, the then Minister for School Standards, the right hon. Member for Tyneside, North (Mr. Byers), who is now the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, told the Committee considering the School Standards and Framework Bill:

"The Government have repeatedly said that, in accordance with the finding of the Public Accounts Committee, many GM schools received funding over and above that received by local authority schools. It is a question not only of delegated budgets, but of additional support. As a result, the pupil unit costs in local authorities are often far higher for GM schools than for the local authority maintained school. We have said that our objective is not to cut the amount being spent on pupils in GM schools but to increase the funding for pupils in other schools. We are therefore levelling up."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 12 February 1998; c. 461.]

So the then Minister, in those remarks, addressed the concerns of a number of schools in the maintained sector and said that, despite the disparities, funding would be levelled up rather than down. Since then, however, the Government have stated that the basic approach to funding in 1999-2000 should be protection, in cash terms, at 1998-99 budget levels per pupil. That suggests that no allowance is being made for inflation and that the funding for former grant-maintained schools will be kept static in cash terms while other schools catch up. Although that appears to be at odds with previous ministerial statements, I hope that the Minister will assure me that that is the wrong interpretation to put on those words.

Another recent development is that Ministers have decided to exclude from the base budget used to calculate the guaranteed amount per pupil the special purpose grant element known as SPG(N). Moreover, it is made clear in a letter from the Department for Education and Employment dated 20 October 1998 that Ministers have also decided that they, and not the local education authorities, will be responsible for calculating the level of GMS protected funding, in consultation with the Funding Agency for Schools.

Those statements have caused much confusion and uncertainty at Highcliffe and, no doubt, at other grant-maintained schools. They are worried about the level of funding that they will receive in the coming financial year.

[Mr. Christopher Chope]

The crisis that the Highcliffe governors face is made worse by the next problem that I wish to raise on behalf of the school. To the uninitiated, that problem is both complex and esoteric. It concerns the consequences for Highcliffe of a reduction in the school's rateable value, announced in 1994-95 in response to an appeal by Dorset county council as long ago as 1990. As a school with charitable status, Highcliffe has to pay only 20 per cent. of its rates assessment. It has made provision to repay that portion of the 20 per cent. of which it has been relieved as a result of the change in rateable value.

However, the complication arises in the treatment of the remaining 80 per cent. Highcliffe receives some funding that emanates from Dorset county council under what is called LMS replication. Before Highcliffe received charitable status, it was liable for 100 per cent. of its rates. Therefore, under the LMS replication rules, Dorset county council has been paying the Funding Agency for Schools the 100 per cent. contribution for rates, despite the fact that only 20 per cent. of that would be payable by the school to the local authority.

As part of the annual maintenance grant provided to the school, a payment is made to the school to offset the value added tax that it, because it is not registered for VAT, has to pay for the purchase of any items on which is VAT is payable. That grant is referred to as SPG(V)—special purpose grant (VAT). The calculation of that grant is not laid down in any regulations and the Funding Agency for Schools was not bound by any inherited basis of calculation. However, the agency decided that the formula for calculating the grant should be by reference to the rateable value of the school. The system operated on the basis that Highcliffe was given a sum of money sufficient to meet the full rates bill without any allowance for charitable relief.

Once received in the hands of Highcliffe, the actual rates payable were paid to the Christchurch borough council and the remainder of the money was kept to offset VAT. My understanding is that, if the difference between rates payable and the sum received does not exceed 2.5 per cent. of the annual maintenance grant, an additional sum will be paid as SPGV.

The nub of that part of the story is that the calculation for VAT relief bears no relation to the amount of VAT paid by the school on goods and services bought. We are talking about a notional formula that has had some bizarre results, particularly where there has been a reduction in rateable values. Where that has happened, Dorset county council, the education authority, expects to be refunded the difference on the whole sum by the funding agency—an argument with which it is hard to disagree.

The Funding Agency for Schools remained uncertain for several years whether, in such circumstances, it should make a corresponding clawback from the annual maintenance grant. In logic, there was no reason why it should do so because it was a deemed payment for a special purpose but, without the clawback the funding agency would be out of pocket.

The question is simply one of equity: where should the loss fall? Should it fall on an individual school, even if the impact on its ability to meet its requirements might be severe, or should it be borne by the funding agency? I look forward to hearing the Minister's opinion because the funding agency clearly did not find that an easy question to answer. Sadly, it ultimately reached the wrong conclusion and passed the burden on to the individual school.

As a way out of a dilemma, the funding agency adopted successive strategies. First, it denied a claim by Dorset county council for repayment. When that did not work, it investigated whether it should apply special purpose grant to Highcliffe and the other schools affected, but decided not to do so, and then it considered the circumstances in each school.

I have gone into the technical detail to give the Minister a flavour of the subject. The essence is that, on 3 August 1998, the funding agency sent Highcliffe school a letter to the effect that it intended to recover £83,000 from the school, which had been overpaid. The school cannot afford to repay that sum and it would cause a great crisis in its finances.

The school wanted to find out why the agency had reached its conclusion. The agency had received a report by Robson Rhodes, the chartered accountants, and the school, not unreasonably, asked to see a copy. Despite the efforts of the school, correspondence with the Treasury solicitor and parliamentary questions that I tabled here, the Funding Agency for Schools has refused to divulge the contents of the report. That has created a climate of suspicion.

I hope that the Minister will allow the report to be issued. It cannot be consistent with the principles of open government that a report used to deprive Highcliffe of £83,000 is not available to the school and its governors. They have been told that they will have to show on their accounts that they have an unmet liability for £83,000 and that it will be repayable over three years. They are far from certain as to how that will be done.

I should be grateful if the Minister would say how that liability will interact with the new funding regime, which comes into effect when the school loses grant-maintained status. I should also be grateful if he could explain what he expects the school to do. It is unable to prove that the funding agency made an error in its calculations because it cannot see its workings. Clearly, the agency has been very coy about giving information. A number of straightforward questions, which I tabled to the Minister and which were referred to the funding agency, have been ducked. The agency purports not even to know the total amount of money involved in its dealings with all grant-maintained schools, something that I find disingenuous in the extreme.

Those are important issues and I hope that the Minister will produce a solution for Highcliffe school today. This is a serious problem—£83,000 coupled, perhaps, with the loss of £40,000 next year as a result of the change of status, for a school with about 1,200 pupils. It does not need me to spell out that that will have serious implications for the quality of the education that will be provided by Highcliffe.

12.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Charles Clarke): First, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate—it is always moving to hear appeals about poverty from deprived areas of the country, such as Christchurch, which he represents. I also congratulate him on his

success with his constituent, which led to the change of subject matter for the debate. That is yet another example of the way in which the Government respond to the concerns raised by hon. Members. Finally, I welcome the hon. Gentleman's remarks about the academic success of Highcliffe school and join him in congratulating the school on that success and on its record, which is well known.

I will deal with the two fundamental points raised by the hon. Gentleman in reverse order—first, with the annual maintenance grant and its redetermination and, secondly, with the general issue of funding.

The Funding Agency for Schools for England has considered Highcliffe school and the other cases carefully. It may be worth giving some background. Where the rates bill has been reduced for past years and schools have received more annual maintenance grant from the funding agency than they should have—money that has not been spent because of the reduction in rate assessment—the regulations permit the agency to redetermine the calculation for previous years if any fact comes to light that would have affected it. The rates revaluation is one such fact, although others are involved, such as pupil numbers and so forth.

That practice goes back to the beginnings of the grant-maintained sector. The regulations that permit the funding agency to do that were introduced by the Conservative Government, of which the hon. Gentleman was a member, according to principles to which he subscribed at the time. The Funding Agency for Schools has simply carried through that process according to its responsibility for securing the proper use of public moneys, as is right and proper. In principle, I conclude that the funding agency was right to redetermine Highcliffe's annual maintenance grant and to recover any overpayment.

In exercising those rights, which has to be done carefully, the Funding Agency for Schools considered the situation for a long time—several years, as you implied. It took detailed legal advice because some of the grant-maintained schools affected were worried and the funding agency was correctly concerned to ensure that any decision that it took accorded with the law and could be properly sustained in the courts. It also took detailed financial advice—you mentioned the accountants, Robson Rhodes and their analyses not only of Highcliffe, but of all the schools involved.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I must remind Ministers as well as Back Benchers of the correct form of address. I think that the Minister is referring to the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope). If he uses the second person, he is referring to the Chair.

Mr. Clarke: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker and I apologise for the slip. I was so concerned to refresh my memory as to whether the Member for Christchurch was right honourable or honourable that I missed that point. I apologise to you and to him for the mistake.

The Funding Agency for Schools considered the situation carefully, took detailed legal advice and took financial advice from Robson Rhodes for all the schools involved. It considered Highcliffe and the other schools with which it was dealing in that round at meetings held in June and July 1998. At that time, 36 grant-maintained schools were in the position that I described and had received more money than they should have following the rates redetermination. Of those 36, it was decided immediately to recover the funds overpaid from 33. That course of action was not taken for the remaining three schools, which included Highcliffe, because the agency wanted to study in more detail their financial situation to understand correctly the implications of any decision. They considered those matters most carefully.

The hon. Gentleman rightly quoted the cost to Highcliffe as £83,000, which represents about 4 per cent. of the school's £2.14 million annual maintenance grant budget for 1998-99. Although it is a significant sum, it must be considered in the context of the overall grant that the school received for the coming year.

The hon. Gentleman may be interested to know why the rates revaluation is so significant for ex-grant-maintained schools. He described the formula that was used as "complex, if not esoteric". Under the rules that were established by the Government of whom he was a member, schools were funded for 100 per cent. of their rates bills, despite the fact that they had to pay only 20 per cent. The 80 per cent. relief was used to pay VAT charges in a back-of-the-envelope calculation of the type that the hon. Gentleman described. Before the hon. Gentleman described the formula as "complex, if not esoteric", I had noted the phrase "toy-town economics". I am glad that we are getting rid of that aspect of the grant-maintained school regime.

The figures that produced the uncertainties, difficulties and problems that the hon. Gentleman described were ludicrous as they were based not on fact, but on a back-of-the-envelope formula that had been decided by the Government of the day. The hon. Gentleman was right to describe it as esoteric and to criticise the system that created the problem. I hope that he will agree that we were right to get rid of that ludicrous formula.

As part of the transitional process, legal responsibility in respect of the three schools that are still facing a problem—it was resolved immediately in 33 cases and three cases are outstanding—passes to the Secretary of State on the advice of the Funding Agency for Schools. I understand that the FAS will be advising in all three cases that the money is recovered in full and paid immediately. According to the FAS, the current balances at Highcliffe school will leave the school with a healthy surplus this year even after payment of the £83,000.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the matter in the House and I shall be happy to receive any further financial submissions from the school if it considers that the advice is inappropriate, for example. On the basis of the advice received from the FAS, the Secretary of State will recover the overpayment in full. Frankly, despite the articulate advocacy of the hon. Gentleman, there is no reason whatever for Highcliffe school to be treated differently from all other ex-grant-maintained schools.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether there had been any exceptions to the position that I described. I am advised that there were two: Wibsey school in Bradford, which is the only local education authority with grant-maintained schools that does not redetermine school budgets after rates have been revalued, and Desborough school in

[Mr. Clarke]

Windsor and Maidenhead, which was agreed very early on by the FAS, which then rapidly realised that it would be setting a precedent that would result in a large loss of resource to education in the sector. The FAS decided not to accept that as a precedent although the decision had occurred at the very beginning of the process.

There is no particular reason to reconsider the position of Highcliffe. There have been scores of decisions on schools since the process began. There is no reason why Highcliffe should be treated differently, so in my view the FAS made the right decision.

The hon. Gentleman also raised the issue of disclosure of documentation. As he probably knows, the FAS has given Highcliffe detailed reasons for its decision. It has responded positively to further requests for information from the school governors and set that out fully. The FAS decision not to release the Robson Rhodes report on Highcliffe or any other school was based on counsel's opinion about the nature of the advice that the FAS received.

I now turn to the general issues of current funding that the hon. Gentleman raised at the beginning of his speech. The Government have set out absolutely clearly by law that recurrent funding per pupil is guaranteed for all ex-grant-maintained schools and Dorset is under the same requirement as anywhere else. Beyond that baseline which is guaranteed by law, Dorset will take its own decisions about specific grants and the standards fund. It is instructive to look at the decisions that Dorset has to take. I understand that the provisional budget that Dorset is currently considering has allocated a 4.7 per cent. increase to education in contrast to the 7.3 per cent. increase that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment allocated for that purpose.

As the hon. Gentleman will know, Dorset county council comprises 21 Liberal Democrats, 15 Conservatives, five Labour councillors and one independent councillor and is under no overall control. It is governed by an interesting alliance of Liberal Democrats and Conservatives.

Mr. Chope: I assure the Minister that the Conservatives are not involved in running Dorset county council. If they were, the position would be very different.

Mr. Clarke: Given the current state of the Liberal Democrats, I am always suspicious about with whom they form alliances. I apologise to the hon. Gentleman for maligning his colleagues in that way.

Dorset county council is considering whether to opt for a 6 or 11.2 per cent. increase in council tax. The area cost adjustment factors that the hon. Gentleman mentioned will no doubt come into that consideration although, as the hon. Gentleman will recall, the area cost adjustment was invented by the Government of whom he was a member.

As in all local authorities, there are arguments about the merits of the budget-setting period. I regard the hon. Gentleman's story about the possible £40,000 cut affecting Highcliffe in the same spirit as the letter from Dr. Howard about his school—as part of the general blitz of material that occurs in the budget-raising process. All hon. Members will be familiar with the issues that surround that process. We shall just have to see what happens.

I very much hope that Dorset county council will allocate significant resources to education and that, given its success, Highcliffe will get the resources that it deserves. However, a speculative £40,000 cut in the middle of the budget-setting process is not a basis for making firm statements in the House; it should be regarded simply as one of the options that is floating around.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Government have said that transitional funding will continue for costs that the FAS would have met in such circumstances. I appreciate the chance that the hon. Gentleman has given me to set out the way in which the issues have been addressed in respect of Highcliffe and elsewhere.

Finally, I wish to emphasise one fundamental political point. We attach immense importance to a smooth transition between ex-grant-maintained schools and local education authorities. Many issues of history, ideology, circumstance, jealousy and so on have been floating around. Everywhere I go I ask the heads of ex-grant-maintained schools about arrangements with the LEA. I ask LEAs the same question and in general, with one or two exceptions—one of the hon. Gentleman's neighbouring authorities may be one—the response has been extremely positive and the Government very much hope that it will continue to be.

Electricity Industry Regulator

12.59 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise a matter that is important to a number of my constituents and, I hope, to the House. As this is my first Adjournment debate, I should like to thank the officers of the Speaker's Office and the Table Office for their assistance.

Hon. Members could be forgiven for having thought, when they saw the title of the debate, that we would be in for half an hour of worthy but dull academic dispute about pricing mechanisms, double recoveries and distribution price controls. Although I must warn the House that such terms will feature in my speech, they are not what the debate is about in essence. Rather, it is about some of my elderly constituents who are trying to heat their homes; the lengths to which the provider—London Electricity—has gone to thwart them; and the inability of the regulator to do much about it.

To explain the background, I have to give a brief chronology of events. The affair has been going on for more than two years, so my explanation will become quite complicated, but I shall distil the key events so as to describe them as briefly as possible. I have provided my hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Industry with a much fuller background briefing.

In my constituency, there is a small housing charity called Mitcham Garden Village, which is a lovely development of 86 dwellings, comprising flats and maisonettes, reserved for elderly Mitcham residents. It is owned by Mitcham Garden Village trust, which is a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee. It is neither an old people's home nor a sheltered housing development.

The houses and flats were built in the 1920s and have no fixed heating other than one gas fire in the living room, as was standard in that period. As I am sure the House knows, such poor heating would not easily be tolerated in this day and age. That is why, when the opportunity came for the residents to install off-peak electrical space heaters, partly through grants provided by the local council, they took the chance to get some decent heating at last.

Now comes the pivotal point: every single resident of Mitcham Garden Village is an individual customer of London Electricity, receiving personalised bills and being entirely responsible for his or her own account. As the residents are elderly—the average age is between 75 and 80—the trust undertook to co-ordinate their applications to London Electricity to get the new heaters connected up to the mains.

To cut a long story short, London Electricity told the trust that the existing network could not support the new load and that, to connect up the heaters, the company would have to build a new substation and carry out related upgrading works. The company quoted various prices, ranging from £28,000 to £75,000, for which, to this day, it says the trust is liable. "Why are we liable?" the trustees asked, "We are not the customer. It is the 86 individual residents, each of whom is a registered customer of London Electricity, who want the electricity, not the trustees."

If 86 residents of Acacia avenue required individual modest load increases, one would not expect London Electricity to roll up the cost and try to bill the whole street for a new substation. Such costs are provided for in the five-yearly price review, when the utilities are given hundreds of millions of pounds to carry out such upgrading. To try to charge residents for the same work is clearly a double recovery.

The trust submitted a complaint to the regulator—the Office of Electricity Regulation—but Offer replied, naturally enough, that the trust was not the customer and that the regulator could only settle a dispute between an individual customer and London Electricity. However, London Electricity maintained that the trust was the customer. At that point, the trust contacted me and asked for my help. In February last year, I wrote to hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Industry asking for his advice. He replied on 4 March, saying:

> "The problem here is that it is not Mitcham Garden Village who is the customer of the company".

That left London Electricity completely isolated: the trust said, "We are not your customer," the residents said, "The trust is not your customer," the regulator said, "The trust is not your customer," and the Minister of State himself said, "The trust is not your customer." Yet London Electricity continued to dispute that fact, and I have to tell the House that it still continues to do so.

In his letter of 4 March, my hon. Friend the Minister made an excellent suggestion, saying:

> "Perhaps the Secretary of Mitcham Garden Village might be able to co-ordinate an arrangement, whereby a small sample of the village residents, (say one or two), seek a quote from London Electricity, as this would clarify the picture on whether it was determinable and what the Director General's determination might be. I hope this is helpful"

Indeed it was, for that was exactly what was happening: one resident, Mrs. Dolly Elnaugh—who desperately wanted to attend today's debate, but who, quite suddenly, had to be taken into hospital—had embarked on exactly that course of action. Needless to say, she got very short shrift from London Electricity, which refused to connect her until the trust paid for all the upgrading work, even though she was only one customer making an application for one set of heaters. Indeed in its evidence to Offer, London Electricity called Mrs. Elnaugh's inquiry—which we must not forget is the course of action suggested by the Minister of State—

> "a contrivance designed to circumvent the consequences of the true situation."

Having got nowhere, Mrs. Elnaugh complained to Offer. In its determination on her case, Offer ruled again that Mitcham Garden Village was not the customer—a fact already grasped by everyone from the Minister of State down, except, of course, London Electricity—and stated that London Electricity had a duty to supply Mrs. Elnaugh,

> "cognisant of its normal charging principles".

In subsequent letters, the regulator stated that it thought that its determination would mean that Mrs. Elnaugh would be connected up at no cost to herself.

After many tortuous months, Mrs. Elnaugh was eventually connected up, but she was landed with a bill for £500 plus VAT for the privilege. "How could it possibly cost £500?" we asked. "Because," replied London Electricity, "that is about one eightieth of the amount needed to upgrade the network". "But you haven't upgraded the network," we replied, "Mrs. Elnaugh is plugged in to the existing infrastructure." London

[Siobhain McDonagh]

Electricity had previously said that it could connect around a dozen residents without having to upgrade, so why on earth was the company charging for work that it had not done? Furthermore, when the next resident asked to be connected—this took place a matter of days ago—London Electricity simply refused, saying that she would have to pay £500 up front.

As I said, this is my first Adjournment debate, and I suspected that, once word got out, there would be a flurry of activity; I was not to be disappointed. On Monday, I received several faxes from London Electricity which, sadly, represent a mere reiteration of the company's case. Of the key points sent, the first states that:

"London Electricity has no desire to leave the residents of Mitcham Garden Village unable to use their new night storage heaters".

Well, I am glad that we agree on something. However, the company goes on to say:

"The residents now have efficient heating installed in their homes which, because the full implications of the scheme were not checked at the outset, they are unable to make use of."

That is simply not true: Mitcham Garden Village approached London Electricity in February 1997, almost two years ago and almost six months before the first heater was installed.

The real reason for the heaters not being connected is London Electricity's bizarre refusal to accept that the 86 residents, who are all registered customers of London Electricity, who all receive individual bills from London Electricity, and who are all personally responsible for settling their accounts with London Electricity, are in fact customers of London Electricity. That is despite the determination of Offer and the judgment of the Minister. In its fax to me this week, London Electricity called the decision to settle the matter with reference to individual customers "unreasonable".

Only one party has behaved unreasonably during this prolonged period. I have been shocked by the high-handed and arrogant way in which London Electricity has conducted itself. My constituents have spoken to me of the distress caused to them by London Electricity's insensitivity. I have no idea whether Mrs. Elnaugh is in hospital for other reasons, but I am concerned that her distress about this matter may have something to do with it.

When I spoke to a senior manager at the company in an attempt to reach some compromise, I too experienced London Electricity's unique brand of customer care. I pointed out that these were elderly people, we were in the middle of winter and there was a flu epidemic on. I was told, "It is not that cold and anyway you don't get the flu from cold weather." I had not realised that one of the benefits of privatisation was that London Electricity now dispenses weather forecasts and medical advice. Would that it dispensed electricity as readily.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, these are the facts of the case. I believe that my constituents have been the victims of a wrong decision by London Electricity, but the case also raises some important issues surrounding the effectiveness of Offer in protecting vulnerable customers. I fully accept that my hon. Friend the Minister is not responsible for the behaviour of London Electricity and I do not expect him to judge the merits of the dispute here and now. None the less, I should like my hon. Friend to answer five key questions, of which I have given him prior notice. I hope that I will get them in within the time available.

First, in this instance, a private utility has acted with an arrogant disregard for the needs of my elderly constituents which deserves to be exposed on the Floor of the House. Furthermore, London Electricity continues to dispute my hon. Friend the Minister's clearly expressed view that

"it is not Mitcham Garden Village who is the customer of the company."

I wonder how my hon. Friend feels about his judgment being so clearly rejected by London Electricity.

Secondly, the case raises important questions about the effectiveness of Offer. There is no doubt that Offer has consistently ruled against London Electricity and has met with repeated obfuscation when trying to uncover simple facts. What is an elderly customer to do when a privatised utility simply ignores the determination of the regulator?

Thirdly, the matter raises further important issues with regard to the future regulatory framework. The response to the consultation on the Government's Green Paper, "A fair deal for consumers", clearly states:

"Economic regulation does not occur in a vacuum. Ensuring that the services provided by these industries are available to all members of society, including the most vulnerable, on fair terms, is important to the Government's wider objectives of creating a fairer society."

The terms offered to my constituents are by no stretch of the imagination fair. How can we regulate the fair treatment of elderly customers?

Fourthly, the response to the consultation further states:

"It will also be important to ensure that the needs of disadvantaged customers—many of whom lack the resources, knowledge or power to argue their cases directly with regulators, companies and the Government—are fully understood."

I am aware of the huge legislative agenda that the Government are steering through the House and that we have had to prioritise our manifesto commitments on constitutional reform, modernisation of the national health service and improving the welfare system, but in the absence of a new utilities Bill, how can we guarantee that the needs of disadvantaged customers are fully understood?

Lastly, as I said at the outset, this is not an academic dispute about pricing mechanisms, double recovery and distribution price control. It is about old and vulnerable people who lack adequate heating. I am extremely proud that the Government have cut VAT on domestic fuel and helped pensioners greatly with their winter fuel bills. The residents of Mitcham Garden Village are not installing swimming pools, power showers or electronically controlled garages that would require massive amounts of new electricity supply. They simply want to connect up the small heaters that they need to warm their homes.

In the two years that the dispute has been dragging on, with still no end in sight, London Electricity has received £232 million to spend on upgrading its infrastructure. In the next financial year, it will spend an additional £116 million. Yet it still wants to charge individual pensioners £500 plus VAT for the privilege of consuming more electricity. There is no competition in domestic electricity distribution so my constituents have no choice. They must pay up or go cold.

I intended to finish my speech here, but just under an hour ago my office was faxed a letter from Offer. I have not had the chance to study it in depth, but it appears that

Offer has once again ruled against London Electricity and told it that it should not charge Mrs. Elnaugh. I await the response of London Electricity with keen interest.

1.16 pm

The Minister for Energy and Industry (Mr. John Battle): It is traditional in the House to compliment the hon. Member who wins an Adjournment debate on drawing a matter to the attention of the House. My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) said that this was her first Adjournment debate. Judging by the quality of her speech, which demonstrated what an Adjournment debate should be, I suspect that there will be a capacity crowd the next time she wins one.

I deeply regret that my hon. Friend has been forced to bring the matter before the House, but her diligence and tenacity in following the case through and—I do not know where she gets it from—the sense of humour with which she has presented her forceful case this afternoon is remarkable.

We are judged as Members of Parliament, Ministers and as a Government by the effects of our decisions—taken in this Chamber about laws and budgets—on our constituents' lives. It is when I get home to my constituency in Leeds and attend my advice surgery that I find out the effects of our decisions and learn what is really going on. My hon. Friend has listened to a constituency case, followed it through and highlighted what I deeply believe is a breakdown in the system. If elderly people cannot get basic justice in simply obtaining a supply of electricity, we need to sharpen up the act somewhere.

My hon. Friend mentioned that her constituent, Mrs. Elnaugh, had been taken into hospital. We wish her a speedy recovery. I hope that this carry-on has not contributed to her distress.

I understand that a series of determinations has been made in this episode. In October 1997, the housing trust asked Offer to reduce the cost of the upgrade. In December 1997, Offer ruled that it could not determine because the housing trust was not the customer. As my hon. Friend kindly acknowledged, I made the suggestion that Mrs. Elnaugh ask Offer to determine on her behalf and that of the other residents who exactly the customer was. On 26 November, Offer determined that Mrs. Elnaugh was indeed the customer.

Offer was asked to make three separate determinations. I emphasise that Offer has strong powers to make determinations once it has been formally asked to do so. That seems to be part of the problem. One has to package the request for determination and then Offer will take a decision. Offer's decisions are then subject only to a judicial review.

In this case, Offer was asked to make three separate determinations. In December 1997, it determined that the application for determination by the housing trust could not be accepted because the trust was not the customer requiring the supply. In November 1998, it determined that London Electricity had a duty to supply Mrs. Elnaugh and to ensure that its system was capable of supporting that demand. I can confirm that, no doubt as a result of my hon. Friend's pressure as a campaigning constituency Member of Parliament, Offer has today ruled that Mrs. Elnaugh should not have to pay anything for the upgrade of her electricity connection. I regret that it has taken so long for Offer to arrive at that decision. I hope that London Electricity will now heed the regulator's determination in respect of the other customers in Mitcham Garden Village who are in the same position as Mrs. Elnaugh.

This has been a long-running case and, in defence of Offer, I say only that Offer has guidelines for how long it should take to make a determination and each of those three determinations was made within the target time of six months. We may have to consider the process whereby determinations get to Offer in the first place and the ducks and drakes that companies may be able to play to avoid getting to a determination. In the light of my hon. Friend's comments, I shall examine that process in detail to find out if it can be sharpened up. I hope that this sorry business will now end and that the decisions satisfy the residents of Mitcham Garden Village.

Many complaints are resolved without the need to refer to the formal, statutory powers of determination of the Director General of Electricity Supply. Since 1990, only 181 determinations have been issued, and 25 of those concerned connection charges. The vast majority of complaints can be handled without getting as far as Offer, but I regret that, if it had not been for my hon. Friend's tenacity, this case might still have been unresolved. Once a determination has been made, action can be taken. I hope that the determination in this case will be noted by London Electricity and acted on.

My hon. Friend mentioned our White Paper, "A Fair Deal for Consumers". In opposition, we said that we would encourage competition where possible but would have regulation where it is necessary to ensure that market failure does not mean that people get left out of the system. Regulations were clearly stacked in shareholders' favour, and we want to set up a framework of regulation that has the consumer at its heart. We consulted widely and published our White Paper. We are now working to fulfil our commitment to put consumers first. We shall introduce a package of measures as soon as parliamentary time permits.

There will be a new primary duty on regulators to protect and promote customers' interests. There will be new independent statutory consumer councils with powers to deal with complaints that are not resolved by the utility companies. Those councils will have a strong role and people will know where to take their complaints. There will be financial penalties on companies for breaching overall and individual customer service standards.

The regulators' social duties and obligations will be extended to cover low-income and vulnerable consumers, including the chronically sick, the disabled, pensioners and rural customers. Ministers will have powers to issue statutory guidance to regulators on social and environmental matters that are absent from regulation at present.

In the meantime, until we can introduce our legislation, the new energy regulator, who has combined duties for gas and electricity and who took up his post just weeks ago, is reconsidering a social action plan, concentrating on providing solutions to the problems of those who suffer from fuel poverty. It is worth reminding ourselves that households on the lowest incomes spend, as a proportion of their total expenditure, three and half times more on fuel than other households do. The poorest pay the most.

[Mr. John Battle]

Expenditure on electricity alone, as a proportion of total expenditure, is five times as high for low-income customers as it is for wealthier ones.

Competition and regulation in energy policy should be measured against the test of whether they work for the poorest and most vulnerable. My hon. Friend has highlighted the fact that, sadly, the system has failed in the case of her constituents. Perhaps recalling that distressing saga will encourage us not only to introduce legislation but to ensure that practice changes in future. The regulator's determination has been made and I repeat that I hope that London Electricity will take heed of it in respect of other customers. The case should be closed and those customers should not have to pay for that upgrade.

We shall work towards introducing legislation for a system of regulation that puts the consumer at its heart, gives new powers to the regulators and extends the reach of regulation to ensure that the poor and vulnerable are not paying the highest price.

I thank my hon. Friend for raising the matter. The way in which she has followed the case in all its detail and her hard work and diligence are a testimony to how Adjournment debates should take individual constituents' cases and highlight faults in the system's structures and processes. I learned a great deal from my hon. Friend's enjoyable speech. I listened to her carefully and I shall ask my officials to examine the background of the case in greater detail to find out what we can do between now and the introduction of legislation to ensure that no one else experiences the same problems. I would not mind my hon. Friend being my MP if she championed my cause so well.

Train Operating Companies

1.27 pm

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): I hope that I shall pass the Minister for Energy and Industry's test for the standard of Adjournment debates by raising an issue of genuine concern brought to my attention by my constituents.

I should start by declaring an interest. I am a daily commuter from Cheam station in my constituency. That experience and the many letters that I receive from constituents led me to seek this debate.

The Minister will know of my interest in rolling stock replacement and slam-door mark I trains. Under existing franchise agreements, the number of mark I trains is forecast to fall from 2,300 to about 1,300 by the end of 2000. However, I understand that 1,031 of those trains have been leased to Connex SouthCentral and South West Trains and will continue to operate because neither company has a franchise commitment to replace those vehicles. Both companies' franchise ends in 2003, and I want to ask a number of questions.

I was a member of the London fire and civil defence authority at the time of the Clapham rail disaster. I remember the trauma, not only of the people involved in the accident, but of the firefighters who went to the rescue. Thirty-five people lost their lives in the disaster and many more were seriously injured.

The Hidden report that was produced as a result of the accident pinpointed the fact that mark I coaches afforded passengers far less protection in a collision than modern carriages. No safeguards are built into the mark I trains to prevent the underframe of one vehicle riding over that of another in a collision. That was known in 1988 and it was known when the first round of franchises were let. I find it extraordinary that no effort was made to secure the replacement or modification of those unsafe coaches during the first round of franchising.

The Hidden report says:

"In the light of the accident BR has set in motion a programme of further research into the Mark I coach which is expected to cost £1 million and to be completed by April 1991."

I emphasise that date—1991. The report continued:

"The future of safety and public confidence demand that such research is fully and expeditiously carried out."

So what happened?

In its evidence to an inquiry by the Transport Sub-Committee of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs in July last year, the Health and Safety Executive said that the issue of mark I safety "fell between two stools" and that it had passed it by. It is hardly surprising that the franchising director did not address the safety issue—the way in which his office was established by the previous Government requires him to address service levels and value for money, not safety. In other words, the Health and Safety Executive dropped the ball on mark I safety in the mid-1990s.

It was not until May 1998, 10 years after Clapham, that the HSE finally began to consult the rail industry about modifying mark I trains by 2003. The result of that consultation and the HSE's recommendations are currently with the Minister, who told me in the House only two weeks ago that she hoped to make an

announcement shortly. How long will we have to wait for that announcement? When will the necessary regulations to bring in the HSE's recommendations be laid before Parliament?

I hold no brief for Connex SouthCentral. Indeed, I hope to show that when it comes to performance, I am certainly no friend of the company and have a very low regard for its delivery of services to many of its customers.

In written answers to me and my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker), Ministers have made it clear that the responsibility for mark I rolling stock rests with the train operators. There is a very real fear that the inaction on the part of the Government—or, perhaps to a greater extent, the franchising director—could result in the residual mark I fleet continuing to operate right up until the end of the franchises held by Connex SouthCentral and SouthWest Trains in 2003.

The mark I would then be grounded—on 2 January 2003—and the incoming operator would face a severe shortage of trains. Again, it will be the poor commuter who pays: four more years of uncomfortable and unsatisfactory journeys in coaches of questionable safety, and the prospect of chaos as the new operator—or Connex, if it survives the franchising round—seeks to deliver a timetable without sufficient trains to do so. I hope that the Minister will tell us how that is to be avoided, and what steps are being taken by the franchising director and the Government to ensure that it does not happen.

In answer to several questions, Ministers have told me that the rolling stock leasing companies have to comply with health and safety requirements, but will the Minister assure us today that the value-for-money obligations placed on the franchising director will not be allowed to get in the way of rail safety? Will she also explain why the franchising director has not sought proposals from the rolling stock companies to secure modification to avoid the grounding of mark I trains in 2003?

One question that I have not yet had the opportunity to ask, but to which I hope the Minister can reply today, is whether the franchising director might be requested to consider calling a meeting with the rolling stock companies to discuss mark I trains, because options and solutions are being developed by the leasing companies. It is worth bearing in mind, as did the Select Committee, the proposal that the Classic could effectively modernise mark I trains in such a way as to meet all the HSE's concerns.

I want to raise two other issues relating to the performance of the train operating companies, especially Connex SouthCentral. The first concerns the time it has taken to secure the much-needed and long-overdue upgrading of Sutton station in my constituency. The fragmentation of the rail industry as a result of privatisation has transformed what should have been a straightforward investment decision into a saga of delay and buck passing among different parts of the present rail industry.

I shall not rehearse the history of this sorry saga, but it is now five years since the project was conceived, and works have still not started. Indeed, my local authority—I checked this only today—has over the past two months rung, faxed and written to Connex SouthCentral, seeking information as to whether it intends to proceed with the project, but it has not even had the courtesy of sending an acknowledgement. That is unacceptable customer care, and it is unacceptable practice between potential partners who are meant to be working together to secure the investment.

The London borough of Sutton would have been putting a substantial sum of money into the project, but all it gets—and all that I have got—from the company is a vague undertaking that work might start this year. We need to know exactly when this year, because the same thing was said in 1998. I hope that, even if not today, the Minister might pursue the company and at least get from it a letter with a clear indication of a start date.

I recently called a meeting of business leaders in Sutton so that they could put their concerns about local rail services to Connex SouthCentral management. Connex failed to turn up. To be fair, I have at last received a fairly fulsome apology for its failure to attend, but it is still not moving on the issues of substance.

A wide range of issues was raised by the businesses represented at that meeting in connection with Connex's performance. High on the list of concerns, for town-centre retailers and for some of the larger employers in Sutton such as Reed Business Publishing, was the appalling condition of Sutton station. The business view is that the station is a real drag on the local economy. Reed Business Publishing told me that it does not invite guests to come to its premises by train because the appearance of the station is such that it conveys the wrong image of the company. It is appalling that a publisher of journals about the railway industry feels that the industry has let it down so badly.

I raised the matter with the Minister about a year ago when she visited the Roundshaw estate in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake). She was helpful and sympathetic, and I hope that she will be able to put a bomb under Connex to get it to start engaging with their partners so that the money can be unlocked and invested in the railway infrastructure to improve the services to my constituents.

Secondly, I urge the Minister to examine how the performance standards under which Connex and other train operating companies operate can be tightened. I know that this has been the subject of discussions with the train operating companies, but I hope that the Minister will say a little more about it today. Again, my meeting with local business leaders underlined my concerns about the inadequacy of those standards and the inadequacy of the services being provided.

Reed Business Publishing, Crown Agents and some of the larger retailers in the town carried out a survey among their staff as part of their preparation for the meeting. They found a consistent pattern of complaint and concerns, which can be summed up as follows: short trains resulting in chronic overcrowding, late-running services and filthy conditions.

During the peak periods, someone catching a train into Victoria or London Bridge from my constituency often ends up standing for more than half an hour, shoulder to shoulder with fellow passengers. The term "cattle truck" is one with which I am familiar, because I see the phenomenon every day. I am fortunate in that I get on the train at Cheam and there are still one or two seats left, but by the time the train gets to Sutton, that is not the case. Many people have to stand every day, but are paying

[Mr. Paul Burstow]

well over £1,000 a year for a season ticket which they believe should entitle them to a little more comfort on their journey to work.

In answer to a question that I posed to the Minister in writing last year, she drew my attention to the franchising director's quality performance figures, which suggested that improvements had been made by Connex in that quarter. However, on closer examination, it becomes clear that the basis on which they are compiled is far from satisfactory. For example, in the case of commuter services like those from my constituency, a train is officially overcrowded only if people have to stand for journeys of more than 20 minutes. For a train to be officially running on time, it has to arrive at its destination within five minutes of its timetabled arrival for short journeys and within 10 minutes for long journeys. However, that measurement applies only to the final destination, not the intermediate stops. As a consequence, many of my constituents travelling to Clapham Junction to make connections to go elsewhere find themselves being let down by the service time and again.

Finally, the penalty regime for running short trains is not sufficient. It does not send a strong enough signal to the companies that the franchising director regards it as an important issue. As a result, evening after evening, trains run short and are thus overcrowded. That is partly because the fines are small, compared with the fines and penalties that apply to late-running trains and the cancellation of trains. I do not propose that those fines should be lessened, but we must find ways of sending clear signals to train operating companies that short trains are unacceptable.

The daily experience of commuters in my constituency—I am sure that this goes for the constituents of all hon. Members—tells them that services are not improving. That perception is an important measure of the way in which those companies are delivering.

The January issue of *Which?* confirms that a survey of rail users found that three quarters of commuters had been late at least once in the previous week, and that four out of 10 commuters had to stand at least once a week. Not all those failings can be attributed to external factors or lack of long-term investment. Many are the result of bad management or management in the interests of the company, rather than the customer.

I hope that the Minister can today give some reassurance to my constituents on rolling stock, not just for the immediate future, but into 2003. I hope, too, that she will give us some comfort that action will at last be taken with regard to Sutton station, and that the shadow strategic rail authority, which I welcome as a proposal, will have teeth and the ability to deliver where privatisation has so manifestly failed.

1.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Glenda Jackson): I congratulate the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) on securing the debate, which provides an opportunity for the House to discuss rolling stock replacement and train operating company performance—two fundamental components in the provision of a proper railway service for the passenger. It is the Government's clear commitment to ensure that such a service is delivered.

I shall begin by affording the hon. Gentleman the comfort that he requested with regard to Sutton station. I have made a note of the failure of Connex SouthCentral to respond to his inquiries, and I shall forward his concerns to the company. I have been informed by Railtrack that refurbishment work at Sutton station will begin on site soon and is expected to be completed by April. The work is structural and will consist of repairs to platforms, refurbishing the underside of the bridge, repointing platform edges, re-roofing and painting the steelwork on the canopy of platform 4. I hope that on that issue, the hon. Gentleman feels somewhat comforted.

As I said, rolling stock replacement and train operating company performance are essential for the provision of a high quality railway service for the passenger. We are therefore keen for substantial investment to be made in rolling stock, and welcome the recent orders that have been announced. Since franchising began, a total of about 1,400 new vehicles have been ordered at a cost of £1.25 billion. Train operators are committed to ordering a further 800 vehicles at a cost of approximately £1 billion. In addition, some 4,000 vehicles have been, or are being, refurbished.

New rolling stock orders not only provide more reliable services and better facilities for passengers, but create extra jobs in the rail industry. We want to ensure that investment in rolling stock is a continuous process, and that our great train manufacturing centres will never again suffer an investment hiatus, such as the four-year drought in orders created by rail privatisation. The most recent order for 352 new vehicles for Virgin CrossCountry—worth £400 million—witnessed the entry into the UK passenger market of a new rolling stock company and a new manufacturer.

I understand the hon. Gentleman's concerns about the safety of mark I rolling stock. It is true that mark I rolling stock, although not inherently unsafe, is not as crashworthy as more modern types of rolling stock. In certain types of train accident, one carriage can ride up over the carriage in front.

The Health and Safety Executive consulted widely last year on proposals that would require all mark I rolling stock to be withdrawn by 1 January 2003, unless it has been rebodied or modified to improve its crashworthiness. If the rolling stock were modified, it could remain in service only until 2007. On 22 December, the chairman of the Health and Safety Commission wrote to my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister with formal recommendations from the commission that Ministers make regulations on the issue.

The hon. Gentleman asked when the Government intended to announce their views. We are considering the HSC's recommendations and expect to be able to make an announcement shortly. However, before regulations can be made, the HSC must satisfy itself that the mechanism that it is proposing to modify mark I stock to make it safer in a crash actually works. The mechanism, which involves fitting a cup and cone to each carriage to prevent overriding, has successfully completed one test, but a further test is required, which it is intended to carry out on 17 February.

The hon. Gentleman expressed concern about the impact of what he perceived as the shortness of franchising on the Health and Safety Commission's requirements. Train operators are required by their

franchise agreements to ensure that they have the necessary rolling stock to enable them to meet their franchise commitments and any HSC requirements. Under the HSC's proposed regulations, Connex SouthCentral as well as Connex South Eastern and South West Trains would be required to replace or modify a significant number of mark I rolling stock.

It would be for the individual train operating companies to make the necessary arrangements with the rolling stock companies. The rolling stock market is a competitive one, as evidenced by the new entrants that I mentioned earlier, and there is sufficient manufacturing capacity to replace, modify or rebody mark I rolling stock by the proposed HSC deadlines.

Mr. Burstow: I shall be brief, in view of the time. I am interested to learn that the HSC needs to carry out further tests, and that those will take place in February. In the Hidden report back in 1989, it was recommended that British Rail should undertake research on that matter by 1991. Was that research ever completed and have its findings informed the HSC's recommendations? If the research was not completed, that raises questions about what was done during the 10 years since the inquiry. I hope that the Minister can answer those questions today, or perhaps she will write to me.

Ms Jackson: I shall write to the hon. Gentleman about that.

On the performance of train operators, I trust that all hon. Members are aware of the Government's concerns about the performance of the rail industry. We want more people to travel by train, but trains that are constantly late or unreliable, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out, do little to encourage people to leave their cars at home. We expect train operators to run services that are consistently punctual and reliable, and we expect Railtrack to meet its obligations to passengers, freight customers and taxpayers to maintain and develop the rail network in a way that offers proper value for money.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for the welcome that he gave to the Government's proposals for the institution of a strategic rail authority. As I am sure he knows, it is the strategic nature of the investment, quite apart from the level of it, that is vital to improve our railway system.

My right hon. Friends the Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister of Transport and I met franchisees and Railtrack on 26 November to discuss our concerns about continuing poor performance. We made it clear that the culture of blame must stop, and that the various parts of the industry must pull together to improve the service to its users. At that meeting, an action plan was agreed to tackle performance problems across our railway. The measures agreed included 800 new train drivers, 500 new vehicles, a joint hit squad to identify and tackle the worst 50 black spots, and a new national passenger survey to find out what passengers think about their rail services and to help measure performance across the network. The action plan is only the first step in delivering short-term improvements to passengers. We expect year-on-year improvements, starting over the next 12 months, and I am pleased to say that the rail industry has committed itself to that.

To build on the success of November's meeting, a larger rail summit will be held on 25 February to identify those matters requiring longer term improvement across the network. A wide range of organisations have been invited to attend the summit, including representatives of passenger and freight train operators, Railtrack, rolling stock companies, local government and the rail users consultative committees. The RUCCs have been invited to bring along to that summit rail-using members of the public who are not necessarily members of their committees.

At the February summit, we shall look to the rail industry to demonstrate how it proposes to deliver the year-on-year improvements that were agreed in November. We have been at pains to point out—it is worth doing so again—that this Government will not tolerate poor performance by train operators. It is in all our interests—those of the industry and of the Government but, above all, of the passengers—that performance targets should be met.

We have also made it clear that train operators' performance will be a key criterion when it comes to franchise renewal. Those who perform well will find that we are constructive partners. We are willing to renegotiate franchises, including franchise extensions, where it offers benefits to passengers and good value for money to the taxpayer. Again, those who perform badly will not have a long-term future in the industry.

Mr. Burstow: I entirely agree that we should secure the best value for money and the most effective services possible. I hope that the establishment of a dialogue between Connex SouthCentral and South West Trains and the marketplace for the supply of rolling stock will be explored at the summit, if not before. From discussions that I have had with various people, there seems to be a serious logjam. I hope that the Minister, or the franchising director or the strategic rail authority can act as an honest broker to get matters moving, so that we may be certain that, by 2003, mark I trains will be either replaced or modified.

Ms Jackson: I am somewhat bemused by the word logjam. As I have said, there are new entrants in the rolling stock market, and there is no shortage of capacity in the rail manufacturing industry. It will be possible to meet all the Health and Safety Commission's requirements. I shall of course bring the hon. Gentleman's concerns to the attention of representatives of the rolling stock and train operating companies at the summit that we propose to hold on 25 February.

Everyone acknowledges that not all the challenges facing the rail industry can be solved overnight. We are under no illusion about the scale of the challenge that we have set ourselves. Passengers want an efficient, reliable and reasonably priced rail service. We are determined to work with the rail industry to ensure that passengers get what they want. The next step in that process will be the February summit.

It being before Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Sitting suspended, pursuant to Standing Order No. 10 (Wednesday sittings), till half-past Two o'clock.

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

National Assembly

1. **Mr. Peter Luff** (Mid-Worcestershire): What plans he is making to hold regular meetings with the First Secretary of the National Assembly; and how frequent he expects those meetings to be. [66268]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Alun Michael): Regular meetings will be held to ensure that the Secretary of State for Wales is fully aware of the views of the National Assembly for Wales on relevant issues. For the first few weeks following the establishment of the Assembly, I shall have to talk to myself quite a lot. I have made it clear that that period will be brief, essentially to smooth the process of transition—in weeks rather than months. Thereafter, I shall certainly work hard to achieve a partnership for Wales with the new Secretary of State.

Mr. Luff: It will be very convenient for the Secretary of State to be able to talk to himself in the mirror when he is shaving in the mornings, but does he agree that, in the long run, there will be a considerable inconsistency between the First Secretary and the Welsh Secretary if the posts are filled by the same individual? The Welsh Secretary would be bound by collective responsibility, unlike the First Secretary, which would make a mockery of devolution.

Mr. Michael: It is clear that the hon. Gentleman, whose interest in devolution is new and welcome, did not listen to my answer. Precisely for that reason, I have made it clear that I intend to step down as Secretary of State for Wales, after a brief transitional period, to concentrate on my work as First Secretary. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman thinks that that is the right thing to do.

Mr. Rhodri Morgan (Cardiff, West): I accept the theoretical point that meetings arranged with oneself are terribly easy to set up—it can be done in a nanosecond—but does my right hon. Friend accept that meetings between two people might be of greater value? Does he also accept that the most significant point behind that question is how Welsh Office civil servants—the Westminster and Whitehall hook-up civil servants, who will serve the on-going functions of the Secretary of State; those who will serve the democratic Assembly; and those who will serve the First Secretary and the Cabinet of the Assembly—will be retrained, or given a new culture, according to which of those functions they will carry out?

Mr. Michael: I find that, when listening to one's first thoughts, it is sometimes wise to ponder a little rather than to think for only a nanosecond before acting or speaking. I have made it clear that, as soon as the functions are in place, it would be sensible, and right, that the First Secretary and the Secretary of State for Wales should be different people, so that they can fulfil those different functions. That is my intention.

I am pleased with the positive response of civil servants to the challenge posed by the Assembly. They understand the new nature of the relationship between them and Members of the Assembly, as compared with the current arm's-length relationship with Members of Parliament. The civil service will be doing things in a new way that will be exciting for Members of the new Assembly and for the officials who work for it. The distinction between the new responsibilities and responsibilities to the Secretary of State and this Parliament is well understood.

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones (Ynys Môn): Does the Secretary of State acknowledge that the long-drawn-out leadership battle between him and the hon. Member for Cardiff, West (Mr. Morgan), which is now coming to the Floor of the House, is destroying the opportunity for proper debate on the real issues affecting people in Wales? When will that leadership battle end, so that we can get on to important policies such as health, education and economic development?

Mr. Michael: I regret the synthetic way in which the hon. Gentleman phrased his question. He well knows that it is the battle for leadership within the Labour party that is interesting. He also knows that the Labour party is delivering on promises made at the general election, and that it is the only party that is able to do that for the people of Wales. In the run-up to the arrival of the Assembly we will concentrate on building a strong economy in Wales, providing jobs for our young people, improving health, improving standards of education and creating safer communities. That is what our people want to hear from us.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): When my right hon. Friend engages in those very important and regular meetings with himself, will he remind himself of the valuable role played by Sully hospital, which is in my constituency and which serves my constituents and his very well, and has for many years? When the future of that hospital is considered by himself, will my right hon. Friend remember the important role that it plays?

Mr. Michael: I could hardly overlook the importance of Sully hospital, given that my hon. Friend is a consistent and long-standing advocate of it. Over the years, he and I have looked at the interests of both Sully hospital and Llandough hospital, which received a charter mark yesterday. I am sure that my hon. Friend will share my pleasure at the recognition of the work of the hospital staff. Certainly, I understand the high priority that he gives the future of Sully hospital.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): Leaving aside the presumptuousness, both personal and party, of the Secretary of State's initial answer, may I ask why—in the same Government—it is considered unacceptable for the two jobs to overlap in Scotland, but acceptable for them to do so in Wales? What is the essential difference between the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly that makes that so?

Mr. Michael: I should have thought that the hon. Gentleman would know the answer to that. I believe that he has many jobs. I believe that, in the Opposition, he is supposed to be Mr. Scotland as well as Mr. Wales, Mr. Northern Ireland and goodness knows what else.

He should know full well that the nature of devolution in Scotland is different from that in Wales, and that the transition period—which will be short—needs to be managed carefully.

When I first went into local government in 1973, there was an 11-month shadow period before responsibilities were taken over. The Assembly will take over its responsibilities very soon after the election. It will be important to manage that transition, in order to ensure that the Assembly starts off effectively and on a sound footing.

Dr. Fox: I am sure that the hon. Member for Cardiff, West (Mr. Morgan) will be grateful for his right hon. Friend's confused boost to his own campaign.

Surely my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) is entirely right: it is not, possible for someone both to be the independently minded leader of a Welsh Assembly and to subscribe to collective responsibility in Cabinet. Those roles are mutually exclusive, and should be separated from the outset, as they have been in Scotland. Would not the Secretary of State do a great service to the whole concept of devolution in Wales by making that clear from the start?

Mr. Michael: The only confusion is in the hon. Gentleman's mind. I have made it clear that it is for precisely those reasons that I intend to stand down from my Cabinet role once the Assembly is in place, in a short rather than a long time. I have been saying that for two and a half months; the hon. Gentleman is obviously deaf.

The role of Secretary of State for Wales needs careful consideration. It changed dramatically in May 1979—[HON. MEMBERS: "1979?"]—when a Labour Government began to breathe life and vigour into it. That contrasts with the activities of the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), who sent moneys and resources back from Wales to the Treasury.

Bus Services

2. **Mr. Chris Ruane** (Vale of Clwyd): If he will make a statement on the provision for urban and rural bus services in Wales for 1999–2000. [66270]

7. **Ms Jackie Lawrence** (Preseli Pembrokeshire): If he will make a statement on the provision for urban and rural bus services in Wales for 1999–2000. [66275]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Peter Hain): In future, that will become the responsibility of the Welsh Assembly. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has increased the budget for bus subsidy grants by over 120 per cent. to £5 million in 1999–2000. That is on top of the support provided by local authorities out of their own budgets, and represents a massive boost for bus services throughout Wales.

Mr. Ruane: Does my hon. Friend agree that £5 million investment—I use the word "investment" rather than the word "subsidy" advisedly—will have an economic as well as an environmental impact? The west ward of Rhyl, in my constituency, has the lowest car ownership in Wales. In 14 months' time, 600 jobs will be created six miles away. If we do not have efficient, reliable, affordable public transport to convey my constituents to the business park, they will be denied jobs.

Mr. Hain: My hon. Friend has made his point effectively. Our new strategy to support public transport will have not just an environmental but a considerable economic advantage, not only to companies but to employees. That is in contrast to the shambles that we inherited from the Conservative Government, whose bus policy reminded me of the present shadow Cabinet: always behind the times, and consisting of a lot of old bangers falling apart.

Ms Lawrence: Is my hon. Friend aware that nearly all 1,800 companies that currently receive bus fuel duty rebate use standard diesel fuel? In the interests of the environment in Wales and of oil refinery jobs in Milford Haven in my constituency, will he impress on the Chancellor of the Exchequer the importance of providing incentives for those companies to use ultra-low sulphur diesel?

Mr. Hain: I will certainly draw my hon. Friend's question to the attention of the Chancellor. She always makes her case effectively on behalf of her constituents. I particularly commend Elf Oil in her constituency for the effective way in which it has promoted ultra-low sulphur diesel because that will help to green motoring throughout Wales and, indeed, Britain.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): The Minister and the Secretary of State have of late been trumpeting throughout Wales the fact that there will be free bus travel for pensioners if and when Labour takes control of the National Assembly for Wales. When I asked the Minister how much that would cost, he told me, in a written answer, that he did not know, but that it would come from local authorities' present budget. That is downright dishonest campaigning.

Mr. Hain: The hon. Gentleman is usually courteous and I find him almost always well informed on policies before the House. On that policy, he is completely misinformed. We are negotiating with the bus operators and with local authorities to achieve the best possible deal for pensioners in Wales, for the public purse and for bus services throughout Wales.

It is a radical and exciting policy. From this year, all pensioners in Wales will be able to travel for half fares throughout Wales; that is an achievement of the Labour Government. In the following two years, a Labour-controlled National Assembly for Wales will be able to move towards free fares for pensioners on buses throughout Wales. That will be welcomed by pensioners, many of whom are trapped at home and unable to get out because they do not have access to a car. The policy will be an enormous boost to their opportunities.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Does the Minister accept the continuing importance of ensuring an integrated system for bus, rail and other public transport? I acknowledge that the money will make a difference, but does he accept that it is still less than 1p per day per resident in Wales? In that context, will he accept

representations from those involved in the bus and rail industries to talk about how they would like the Welsh Office to help them to integrate their transport systems?

Mr. Hain: I chair the Wales transport advisory group, on which bus operators and others, including local authorities, are represented. Through that channel, which is unique to Wales, we have made much progress in achieving effective and coherent public transport policies for Wales. We have introduced many changes already, but I will bear in mind what the hon. Gentleman has said.

For the first time, we have put £11 million into integrated transport packages throughout Wales. That was never done by the last Conservative Government, who turned their back on public transport in favour of a manic support for the private motor car. The policy will enable the hon. Gentleman's constituents and others to have real choice: to use the car if they wish, but to have available a high-quality choice of other transport if they want to use it.

Rights of Way

3. **Mr. Andrew F. Bennett** (Denton and Reddish): What percentage of rights of way in Wales he estimates will be free from obstruction on 1 January 2000; and what further steps he plans to take to ensure that 100 per cent. are free of obstructions. [66271]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Jon Owen Jones): Of the public rights of way that were surveyed between 1992 and 1997, 53 per cent. were free of obstruction at the end of 1997 and a further 24 per cent. were considered usable. The Countryside Council for Wales is funding programmes that are improving that by a further 1,500 km, or 4 per cent of the total, each year. In future, that matter will become the responsibility of the National Assembly for Wales.

Mr. Bennett: I thank the Minister for that reply. Does he agree that, as more than 18 million people in the United Kingdom enjoy walking, and many of them do that in Wales, it is important that the target set for the millennium of having all rights of way free of obstructions is met? What will be done in Wales to increase access to the countryside, which is important for tourism?

Mr. Jones: I agree that we should have an ambitious target, but I do not agree that it is worth keeping a target if it is not possible to meet it. The target of making rights of way free of all obstructions by 2000 is clearly not likely to be met. What is more, it is good policy not to have that as a target that we must meet, but rather as a continuing task. There will always be a need to invest in access to the countryside. The Countryside Council for Wales is investing almost £1 million in grant in aid to local authorities to improve access to the countryside. In addition to that, we are investing £300,000 over the next three years to develop national trails. I expect to be able to approve a proposal for Ffordd Glyndwr in the next few months, which will be a national trail running right through the heart of Wales.

National Assembly

4. **Mr. James Gray** (North Wiltshire): What is his Department's budget for promoting the elections for the National Assembly for Wales. [66272]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Alun Michael): Some £2 million will be spent on the information campaign for the National Assembly elections. I am sure that members of all parties will agree that it is important for people to be fully informed on the powers and responsibilities of the Assembly and to be encouraged to vote.

Mr. Gray: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. Will he submit the budgets for the approval of the Neill Committee on Standards in Public Life? If he does not agree to do so, does he not risk falling foul of that committee in precisely the same way as he did over the misuse of public funds spent on behalf of the Labour party during the referendum campaign?

Mr. Michael: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the requirements will be met to the letter. I know that he simply means to cast a slur, but it is not justified. We will take advice whenever it is necessary and make sure that it is fully observed.

Mr. Gareth Thomas (Clwyd, West): Does my hon. Friend agree that, given the far-reaching nature of the powers of the National Assembly and the difficulties that we face in Wales because of the absence of a national printed press and difficulties with television reception, it is entirely right and proper that public money should be spent to promote knowledge of this important institution? It will change the nature of this place and the civil service.

Mr. Michael: My hon. Friend is right. Objective information will be provided highlighting the date of the elections; for example, there will be a telephone helpline, which I launched on Monday.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): Will the Secretary of State agree to investigate information that is coming through about promotion of the National Assembly by the BBC and other media whereby the conventions under the Representation of the People Act may not be adhered to regarding equal time for all political parties? If that is so, would not that be unfair and not in the interests of democracy in Wales?

Mr. Michael: Although it is not a matter for me, I am happy to agree with the hon. Gentleman that the requirement for fairness in broadcasting during the pre-election period is crucial. If the hon. Gentleman has specific concerns, I shall be happy to look at them and to ensure that they are raised in the appropriate quarters. It is for the broadcasters to ensure—I hope that they will do so—that they observe the rules to the letter and are fair in all their coverage.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in promoting the Welsh Assembly, there is a golden opportunity to promote a modern

institution that takes into account family-friendly working practices and child care for all those who work and represent within the Assembly?

Mr. Michael: Yes, that is a very good point and it is our intention to do that. However, an Assembly being family friendly suffers, to some extent, the same problems as this House. Those who live a long distance away in north or west Wales have an interest in concentrated periods of longer hours whereas those who live nearer have more of an interest in limitations on the length of the day. I know that, once elected, the Assembly Members will want to engage in discussions on that. Being family friendly in the way suggested by my hon. Friend is part of our thinking in the discussions that I am having with civil servants in preparing the way for the arrival of the Assembly.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): The permanent secretary has estimated the full cost of the Assembly in the first year as being £121 million, including, £10 million for the cost of the Assembly building, £20 million for new staff and offices, £28 million for the official opening ceremony and staging the elections and now £2 million to sell this piece of flagship legislation to the public. We were told that we were being fanciful when we said that the Assembly would cost £100 million over five years. That figure has now been exceeded and expenditure is above the White Paper estimate on which people voted. When will the Secretary of State get a grip on this expenditure, which is running away with itself, and ensure that the money is spent in a far better way, on the people of Wales, instead of on politicians and bureaucrats? *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. The House must come to order. The conversations are far too noisy. It is churlish of the House not to listen to what hon. Members are saying.

Mr. Michael: Hon. Members were probably asking themselves what on earth the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) was on about. He has picked up on figures that were reported inaccurately. In fairness to *The Western Mail*, it carried a letter, signed by the permanent secretary to the Welsh Office, correcting the figures that he has just used. I recommend that the hon. Gentleman reads that letter before allowing his anger to become even more synthetic.

EU Representation

5. **Mr. Dafydd Wigley** (Caernarfon): What response he has made to the recommendations of the working party, set up by his Department, on improving links between Wales and the EU; and if he will make a statement. [66273]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Alun Michael): In December, I published the report of the informal working party. I warmly welcomed it as contributing to the on-going debate on improving links with Europe and sent a copy to each Welsh Member of Parliament. I have taken a number of initiatives to promote Wales in Europe since I became Secretary of State and I shall continue to do so. I have made it clear in everything that I have said that our relations with Europe and Wales's profile in Europe are central to everything that the Welsh Office does before the Assembly comes into being and will be central to the work of the Assembly.

Mr. Wigley: Will the Secretary of State assure the House that he will accept and implement the almost 50 recommendations in the report? Will he address in particular the suggestion in paragraph 8.5, which says that Welsh Office officials have not been adequately involved in committees and meetings in Europe and asks for greater emphasis to be put on that? What proposals does he have to strengthen the Welsh Office presence in the United Kingdom permanent representation office in Brussels—UKREP—which was also recommended in the report?

Mr. Michael: I have already taken steps along those lines. I was in Brussels 10 days ago when I discussed with UKREP and with commissioners how to improve Wales's profile in Europe. UKREP is positive about the points that we discussed and we shall be co-operating with our permanent representatives. The report has already been before several bodies. The task force on Europe had a two-day session at the beginning of last week to look again at the onset of objective 1 and other issues concerning our relationship with Europe. I intend to take those points forward during the next month.

Mr. Denzil Davies (Llanelli): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the functions that the Secretary of State currently exercises in Whitehall and in Europe will be transferred to the Assembly once it is established and will be exercised by the First Secretary of the Assembly, not by the Secretary of State for Wales?

Mr. Michael: The vast majority of the responsibilities of the Secretary of State for Wales will transfer to the Assembly. Some functions will remain with the Secretary of State for Wales. All those issues will be dealt with in the transfer of powers Order that I shall bring forward shortly. That will make clear the details. I understand the point that my right hon. Friend is making.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Why did the Government refuse to give the Welsh Assembly the right to question the Secretary of State for Wales after a meeting of the Council of Ministers?

Mr. Michael: I am not sure what sort of abstruse point the hon. Gentleman is trying to make. The vast majority of the responsibilities of the Secretary of State for Wales transfer to the Assembly, to which the First Secretary and the Assembly Secretaries will be fully accountable. They will answer questions and will deal with the issues in much more detail than I and my two ministerial colleagues can.

Assisted Areas

6. **Mr. Barry Jones** (Alyn and Deeside): When he expects changes to be agreed to the assisted area map of Wales; and if he will make a statement. [66274]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Alun Michael): The Commission has asked member states to propose new assisted areas by 31 March 1999.

The proposals will be subject to the agreement of the Commission and the new map will come into force on 1 January 2000.

Mr. Jones: I fear that bureaucrats in Brussels are plotting to take assisted area status away from Deeside. I hope that my right hon. Friend and his Department will work hard to prevent that. Flintshire county council has submitted a detailed memorandum, which I support, and I hope that he will read it. He might like to accompany me at half-past 3 to Room W1, where I have a lobby of Raytheon workers.

Mr. Michael: There is no danger whatever of Deeside being overlooked as long as it is represented with the vigour that my hon. Friend brings to bear. I have been made aware, both by him and by Councillor Tom Middlehurst, of the evidence that Flintshire has submitted, and it will certainly be treated seriously. Having recently visited Raytheon, I can tell my hon. Friend how impressed I am by both the workers and management there, and the co-operation that they demonstrate in their bid to bring new jobs and continued success to the company and the area.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Given the disastrous state of farming in Wales and the totally anaemic Government response to the Welsh Affairs Committee report, what account has the Secretary of State taken of the rural crisis in assisted areas?

Mr. Michael: I should have thought that the hon. Gentleman would keep quiet on such a point, considering the disastrous nature of the previous Government's work on agriculture and farming. He should be ashamed of himself and keep silent in the Chamber, especially on the subject of the damage that was caused to Welsh farmers. Assisted area status, and indeed area 1 status, will be of particular relevance to farming areas throughout Wales, as are the policies that I have introduced and that were promoted by my immediate predecessor, to concentrate on the needs of mid and west Wales, to bring alternative employment to the areas that have had the most difficulty, and to help farmers to expand their ability to increase their incomes and experience success in the future.

Agenda 2000

8. **Mrs. Ann Winterton** (Congleton): If he will make a statement on the impact on Wales of the Agenda 2000 proposals. [66276]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Jon Owen Jones): The Agenda 2000 discussions are a vital component of reform of the European Union that will make an enlarged Union workable and provide for simpler and more easily accessible European programmes for people in all parts of the United Kingdom and the rest of the European Union. The Department is fully involved in discussions on the Agenda 2000 programme, both here and in Brussels, to ensure that Wales's needs are met. In future, agriculture in Wales will be the responsibility of the Assembly, which will work closely with my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food as lead Minister on European agricultural matters.

Mrs. Winterton: Does the Minister agree that the Agenda 2000 proposals will have a damaging impact on farm incomes, at a time when Welsh farmers are suffering considerable financial strain under the Government's policies? Cannot a strong case be made for the introduction of an early retirement scheme?

Mr. Jones: I do not agree that the proposals should be regarded as a threat to our industry. Many benefits will flow from them to United Kingdom consumers and to farmers and rural Wales. They will remove uncertainty, allow farmers to plan future investment and move the industry towards a more market-driven and therefore more sustainable future. I should have thought that the hon. Lady would support the Government's efforts to create a sustainable industry in rural Wales and the rural United Kingdom.

Tourism

9. **Mr. Martyn Jones** (Clwyd, South): What are the current employment levels in tourism in *(a)* Clwyd and *(b)* Wales. [66278]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Peter Hain): Figures for the former county of Clwyd are no longer available. About 100,000 people are directly or indirectly employed in tourism in Wales. In future, the matter will be the Assembly's responsibility.

Mr. Jones: My hon. Friend will be aware of the poor year that several sectors of the tourist industry in Wales have experienced. Will he provide any extra funding for the Wales tourist board, in particular for marketing, as we will be hosting the rugby world cup this year?

Mr. Hain: We have increased the budget of the Wales tourist board by £1 million this year, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced recently—the biggest-ever increase for tourism in Wales. In addition, we are looking closely at promoting extra funding for the marketing of tourism in Wales, because the Wales tourist board's campaign "Wales—Two Hours and A Million Miles Away" has been extremely successful in encouraging people to come to Wales and enjoy themselves.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [66297] **Mr. Stephen Twigg** (Enfield, Southgate): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 27 January.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I will have further such meetings later today.

Mr. Twigg: No Member of this House could fail to have been moved by the tragic events in Colombia over the past few days. Although the general increase in the Government's aid programme over the past two years has

been widely welcomed, may I ask the Prime Minister what immediate action the Government are taking to support the disaster relief effort in Colombia?

The Prime Minister: This is the worst earthquake in Colombia this century. The numbers of casualties are difficult to confirm, but at least 2,000 are reported to have died. Obviously, the immediate need is for rescue efforts to save people who are still trapped in the rubble, to help people injured or made homeless by the earthquake and then to try to help in the task of providing for those who have been displaced by it. We have made significant sums of money available through the British embassy and the Pan-American Health Organisation as part of our initial response to the immediate needs in Colombia. We also stand ready to make a contribution to a European Union effort. We will continue to do all that we can to ensure that the international community responds to this humanitarian crisis in an effective and co-ordinated way.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): May I associate the Opposition with the remarks that the Prime Minister has made on Colombia?

Last week, I asked the Prime Minister about terrorist mutilations and beatings in Northern Ireland. Following that, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland held meetings on Monday to ask for an end to those horrific acts—an initiative that we welcomed. A few hours after those meetings, a 24-year-old man was seized in east Belfast and shot twice. The same thing happened last night. In the past few hours, Eamon Collins—who turned informer against the IRA—has apparently been found dead. There is mounting concern in all parts of the House—as I know the Prime Minister will acknowledge—about this matter. Will he confirm that the Government have the legal power, if they wish, to halt the early release of terrorist prisoners if this barbaric activity does not stop?

The Prime Minister: Yes, that is right—we have the power to bring to an end the early prisoner releases. We would do so in circumstances where we could no longer say that a ceasefire was in place. That, therefore, is the issue—whether the right judgment now is that, as a result of the punishment beatings, the ceasefire is at an end.

I asked for research to be done following Question Time last week, and it might be helpful if I gave the House the figures for punishment beatings over the last few years. In 1994, there were 192; in 1995, 220; in 1996, 326; in 1997, 228; in 1998, 209. During one part of that period—*[Interruption.]* None of those is tolerable or right. We should do everything we can to stop these incidents and to bring to justice those responsible. However, the point that I am making is that there was a ceasefire before, under the previous Government, during which punishment beatings were being carried out; indeed, to a rather greater degree than now. The previous Government's judgment at the time, which we supported, was that it was not right to bring the whole process to an end. That is the judgment that we continue to make, for the reasons that I have given.

Mr. Hague: May I ask the Prime Minister to acknowledge several things? First, I am grateful for his clarification that the Government have the legal power about which I inquired, as the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland said on the radio this morning that she was not sure about that power.

Secondly, does the Prime Minister agree that the word "beatings", which many of us have used about the punishments being meted out, does not do justice to what is happening in Northern Ireland? Thirdly, will he acknowledge that, although in recent years there have always been such beatings and mutilations, we did not have an agreement in the earlier period? Now we have the Good Friday agreement, which people are meant to be implementing. According to figures from the organisation Families Against Intimidation and Terror, representatives of which I met this morning, the number of such incidents increased from 388 in 1997 to more than 500 in 1998. That number is continuing to rise, even after the agreement.

Will the Prime Minister confirm that legislation requires that the Secretary of State must take into account whether these organisations are

"committed to the use now and in the future of only democratic and peaceful means",

that they have

"ceased to be involved in any acts of violence or of preparation for violence",

and that they are

"co-operating fully with"

the Commission on Decommissioning—which presumably means giving up or preparing to give up their guns or bombs? If none of those things is happening, the Government have not only the power, but the justification at least to put on hold the terrorist releases that are taking place.

The Prime Minister: I think that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was referring to the fact that we cannot slow down the process. However, slowing down is anyway what is happening, as releases are running at about a third of their previous rate. *[Interruption.]* Yes they are. It is true, however, that we can stop them altogether. In those circumstances, we would then declare that the ceasefire no longer exists.

If that were to happen, the consequences would be immense for the whole of the process in Northern Ireland. I am not saying that it would never be right to come to that judgment, just that I do not believe that such a judgment would be right now. The figures for attacks and assaults on people given by the right hon. Gentleman are not the same as those that I have. However, I pointed out a moment ago that, under the previous Government, there was a ceasefire and punishment beatings went on in exactly the same way. An early release scheme was also going on under that Government. If the right hon. Gentleman wants the figures, I can tell him that there have been 238 releases under this Government's proposals, compared with 325 under the previous Government's scheme. It is correct to say that no lifers were involved under that scheme, but none the less the prisoners involved had been convicted of offences such as conspiracy to murder and to cause explosions, and of armed offences of one sort or another.

I read out that list simply to convey to the right hon. Gentleman that I accept that this is—and has to be—an imperfect process and an imperfect peace. However, it is better than no process and no peace at all.

Mr. Hague: We very much agree that it is an imperfect process and an imperfect peace. The Prime Minister knows that we have supported the Good Friday agreement, that we will continue to do so and that we have backed up the Government on very many of these matters—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. This is very time-consuming. I am watching the clock and I want Back-Bench Members to ask questions, as well as the two Front-Bench Members.

Mr. Hague: If this is not the place to raise the question of violent acts of intimidation carried out against people in our own country, then what is the House of Commons for? We have a bipartisan policy, but we have a disagreement over this matter, as do some Labour Members. It is right for the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) and the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) to raise the matter in this House, and it is right for the Opposition to do so as well.

The Secretary of State says that she is prepared to act if there is evidence that particular parties affiliated to paramilitary groups are returning to violence. Much of the necessary evidence seems to exist. The Chief Constable has said that

"there is no doubt whatever that all of these organisations, including those who purport to be in cessation of military operations, are engaged in this . . : activity."

The evidence comes from victims' families and many other sources. Will the Prime Minister, therefore, also accept that the evidence exists in abundance and that there can be little doubt that the paramilitary organisations are responsible for what is happening?

The Prime Minister: As I pointed out to the right hon. Gentleman last week, it is also the case that the Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary believes that the ceasefire is still in place. However, let me make one thing clear. I do not dispute the right hon. Gentleman's right to raise matters. He is correct; this is the right place to raise them. What I dispute is this. The previous Government had to make difficult judgments. For example, for months they engaged in secret negotiations with the IRA and denied that they were doing so. When they had to admit it to the House, not one member of the Official Opposition or one Liberal Democrat criticised them for it because we knew the difficulties of the process.

When I point out to the Conservatives that there were punishment beatings and appalling things going on under the previous ceasefire, but that there were prisoner releases, I do so not to criticise the previous Government, but to point out that true bipartisanship is not about talking about it, but about delivering it.

The shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland can chatter away as much as he likes, but I do not doubt that the Leader of the Opposition is well intentioned. I believe that he is being dragged along by some people who do not wish the agreement well. When the Conservatives were in government, we gave them that support through the difficult as well as the easy times, so I do not dispute their right to raise the matter, but I question the motives of some of them in doing so.

Mr. Hague: Of course, the Prime Minister is right to say that the Labour party often supported the previous Conservative Government—[HON. MEMBERS: "Always."] But Labour Members also voted against the Prevention of Terrorism Act. The Prime Minister did not make speeches of that sort then. I raise those points not because I am being dragged along by anyone, but because the representatives of Families Against Intimidation and Terror came to see me this morning and said, "You're right to raise this issue. Please go on doing so." We are raising it on their behalf.

The nature of the disagreement is clear. It comes down to one thing and the Prime Minister is being straightforward about it. We say that he has the power to act and the justification to do so, and so forth. He says that, despite all that, the wider interests of peace require the early releases of terrorists to continue. That is a matter of judgment. Is not the logical conclusion of that approach that every terrorist could be released from prison without a single gun or bomb being given up, and without an end to the mutilations? Will he guarantee that that situation will not come about?

The Prime Minister: I take the judgment that I do because I believe that the Good Friday agreement still provides the best chance of peace in Northern Ireland. I have made clear our total condemnation of those attacks and our desire to do all that we can to prevent them, but the right hon. Gentleman also has to face up to the consequences of what he demands me to do. If we ended up exercising our power and declaring the ceasefire at an end, the consequences for the agreement would be huge. We make a judgment the whole time, as I said last week, but I believe that that judgment is essentially still correct. We keep it under review the entire time—*[Interruption.]* I ask the right hon. Gentleman and Conservative Members who are shouting, "Disgraceful!" and "Shame!", at me to recognise the difficulties faced by any Government in this situation and the enormous consequences of bringing the whole process to an end.

Mr. Hague: We recognise the difficulties, but the great danger is—it is a danger that the Prime Minister must acknowledge—that before long, all the terrorists will be freed without meeting their part of the agreement. For that reason and that reason alone, we are saying that it is right to put on hold the early release of terrorists.

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, even at the end of the two-year period, there will still be people in prison for the offences that they committed. In the end, we have to make a judgment and my judgment is that the wider interests—not of prisoner releases, but of peace in Northern Ireland—require us to continue to do all that we can to make the process work. I raised what happened under the previous Government not to criticise—*[Interruption.]* No, I am not criticising them. On the contrary, we supported them. We did so precisely because we realised the difficulties that they faced.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about the Prevention of Terrorism Act. He well knows what the problem was under the previous Government and what we could have done. At the time, their majority depended on the support of the Ulster Unionists. At any point through all the difficulties of those years, we could have brought down the Government on this matter, had we wished to do so. We did not because we believed that the broader public interest demanded that we acted responsibly. I still believe that the broader public interest is secured by making the agreement work.

Q2. [66299] **Ms Debra Shipley** (Stourbridge): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the huge burdens that are shouldered by carers such as Lucy? She cares for a man, doing all the cooking and cleaning. She gets him up in the morning, helps to put him to bed at night and assists with his personal needs. Lucy is 10 years old and looks after her father. Does my right hon. Friend agree that such children need practical help urgently? Will he assure the House that young carers will receive that practical help under the new strategy for carers?

The Prime Minister: I pay tribute to the contribution made by carers young and old. There are literally millions of them of every age and in every set of circumstances, and they do a marvellous job caring for relatives. Of course, the rise in child benefit will provide enormous help to all children. As for older people, our proposed pension reforms will ensure that long-term carers get up to £1,500 per year in pension as a result of the flat-rate credits that we shall award them under our new proposals. In addition, from April, we shall introduce a £2.5 billion package for the poorest pensioners. Children such as Lucy will be helped and so will older people.

Madam Speaker: I call Mr. Ashdown—*[Interruption.]* Order.

Mr. Paddy Ashdown (Yeovil): They will miss me when I am gone.

The Secretary of State for Social Security recently claimed that the average pensioner in Britain—which does not yet include me—was £140 a year better off under Labour, but as every pensioner knows, that is nonsense. Will the Prime Minister confirm that those figures are based on not one year but two, on a family not an individual, apply to only 30 per cent. of pensioners and take no account of raised taxes or lost tax reliefs under the Government? Taking all that into account, is it not the case that the average pensioner in Britain, far from being £140 a year better off, is actually £2 a year worse off under Labour?

The Prime Minister: No. The right hon. Gentleman is not right about that. Indeed, as a result of the cut in VAT on domestic fuel, the special bonuses for fuel of £50 for those on income support and £20 for others, and the package of measures that come into effect in April—the £2.5 billion package that will help the poorest pensioners in particular—my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is absolutely right.

Mr. Ashdown: I hope that the Prime Minister will look further at those figures, because he will find that they are contested by almost every group that has any credibility in the matter. May I put a simple and concrete proposition to him? It is nearly always the oldest pensioners who are the poorest pensioners. The age supplement for pensioners over 80 has remained at 25p a week for more than a quarter of a century. If the Government were to raise that from 25p a week to £5 a week, it would cost relatively little and would reach twice as many pensioners as the minimum income guarantee proposed by the Government. Why not do that?

The Prime Minister: Because we believe that, by raising the minimum pension guarantee by £5 for a single person and £7 for a couple, we shall provide more help to more people. In addition to the things that we are doing for pensioners, which I mentioned a moment ago, from April this year, there will be free eye tests and concessionary travel. We are getting help to many pensioners in the country who would otherwise not get that help. That is all being achieved through measures introduced by the Labour Government to improve the living standards of pensioners of every description throughout the country. Although there is far more that we want to do, that is not a bad start for our first two years in government.

Mr. Gordon Marsden (Blackpool, South): Does my right hon. Friend share my pride in my constituents from Blackpool Victoria hospital, who came to London yesterday to receive their charter mark award? Does he accept the views of many Labour Members that his comments on that occasion were entirely right, entirely appropriate and in striking contrast to the Conservative Government's frequent denigration of public services?

The Prime Minister: We value those who work in our public services and we are getting more resources into the front line of those services. We shall not cease to say that the extra £40 billion that is going into schools and hospitals from this April—despite the opposition of the Conservative party, whose members said that ours were reckless and irresponsible plans—will not only help to reward better those who work for our public services, but raise the standards of the services themselves.

Ministerial Visit (Kingswear)

Q3. [66300] **Mr. Anthony Steen** (Totnes): If he will visit Kingswear in order to take a trip to sea in a crabber.

The Prime Minister: I regret to say that I have no immediate plans to do so.

Mr. Steen: Either the Prime Minister enjoys the seas around the Seychelles more than the icy steel waters of the English channel, or the reason why he does not want to accept the second invitation that I have extended to him to go to sea in a British fishing boat is that he does not want to see the wanton destruction of the sea beds and the marine environment, which is largely caused by Belgian

and Dutch beam trawlers and scallopers with outsize 1,500 horsepower engines and 40 dredges—20 on either side—which do immense damage to the sea bed and to shellfish. How does he square that with the Labour party's conservation policy?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the holiday advice. We have no information about Dutch or Belgian vessels infringing their access rights, and if the hon. Gentleman has any such information, we should be grateful if he would bring it to the attention of the relevant authorities. However, the proposition apparently being advanced by the Conservative party, which is to withdraw from the common fisheries policy altogether, would not be a sensible way to proceed. There are huge problems, but we are committed to trying to ensure that the CFP is a more effective instrument for the conservation of fish stocks.

To ensure a more healthy marine environment and a sustainable fishing industry, we are putting in extra investment; and we have managed to tighten European Union rules on the breach of the fishing quotas. To withdraw from the CFP, which is the alternative put forward by the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends, would lead to a worse situation, not a better one.

Engagements

Q4. [66301] **Mr. Ronnie Campbell** (Blyth Valley): My right hon. Friend took a keen interest in the miners compensation scheme for vibration white finger, which is now in place to the tune of about £500,000. May I ask him to take a keener interest in the other case that the miners are currently fighting, which relates to emphysema and bronchitis, which is a slow, agonisingly painful disease suffered not only by miners, but by their families and, sadly, their widows?

The Prime Minister: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's campaigning on these issues. He was a miner for 30 years or more. We were obviously pleased that we managed to achieve a successful conclusion on the vibration white finger issue. That settlement will mean that many people are compensated who should have been compensated. As for the respiratory disease litigation, I can tell my hon. Friend that we are close to finalising the handling arrangements to deal with the 65,000 claims that we have received to date. We believe, and are hopeful that, full final settlement offers will start to flow in as soon as possible. Before long, we hope to be able to proclaim another agreement to deal with these issues. I hope that that will provide security for many thousands of ex-miners suffering from work-related illnesses. After years and years in which compensation claims were not properly dealt with, it will be a pleasure for the Government to deliver to former miners.

Q5. [66302] **Mr. David Chidgey** (Eastleigh): I am sure that the Prime Minister will be aware that the Liberal Democrats support the objectives of the Tax Credits Bill and welcome the £1.5 billion of new money to help poorer working families. Does he, however, recognise the strong concerns felt not just by the Liberal Democrats, but by the Trades Union Congress, the Low Pay Unit and the Confederation of British Industry about the detail of the Bill? Will he give the House an assurance that small firms will be exempt from the burden of administering the scheme and that all employees will have the right to claim their tax credits directly from the Inland Revenue in order to maintain confidentiality?

The Prime Minister: We are addressing the concerns that have been put to us by business. The Inland Revenue will be doing all the administration and calculation of what is due if the employer pays the tax credit through the pay roll, but we are also transferring the Contributions Agency to the Inland Revenue. So there will be a big simplification of the way in which many businesses handle payments to their staff.

We are making provision at least for single-earner couples to choose to be paid through their order book or bank account. We want to make sure that the scheme works properly and has the minimum potential for abuse within it. We are trying to address all the concerns that have been put to us, but it would be disastrous if we put the scheme at risk. Of course we will listen to any concerns put to us, but literally 1.5 million people will receive a benefit of about £17 a week. All couples or single parents earning even the lowest income will have a minimum income of £10,000 a year.

The shadow Social Security Secretary has pledged that the Conservatives will abolish the scheme. They should know that they will be going into the next election pledging a tax rise of £17 a week for 1.5 million people. Given the state of the Conservative party, it does not surprise me, that that is its proposal.

Q6. [66303] **Mr. Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter): May I welcome the long overdue separation of those responsible for producing Britain's food and those responsible for policing its safety? Does my right hon. Friend agree that, had we had a Food Standards Agency a few years ago, we might have avoided the fiasco of salmonella in eggs and the scandal of BSE? Can he confirm that the funding mechanism for the FSA is still a matter for public consultation, but that the modest cost proposed is a small price to pay for consumer confidence in the safety and quality of Britain's food?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend. I gather that the Conservative party is now opposed to the proposal. I think that it is making another big mistake. Most people, who remember salmonella, E. coli and BSE, and see that there were 93,000 cases of food poisoning in the past year, believe that the FSA is a long overdue reform. The charge works out at £1.73 a week, which is less than the price of a Big Mac. That is not a great deal to pay for clean and safe food in Britain.

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): Does the Prime Minister intend to visit the trade union rally being held in the House this afternoon? If so, how will he reply to the remarks of John Edmonds, who leads the GMB, who, on the radio this week, described the economy as being as

flat as a pancake? How will he reply to Bill Morris, who leads the GTWU—*[Laughter.]* Mr. Morris leads one of our major unions. He described the Government's industrial policies as "sterile" and said in the *New Statesman* that it would be extremely difficult to motivate any of his workers to do any more work for the Labour party.

The Prime Minister: I am delighted that the hon. Lady has decided to support the trade union movement and read the *New Statesman* after all these years. I say to her exactly what I say to them—the fact that we are entering an economic downturn with interest rates falling, the lowest long-term interest rates for over 30 years, the Budget deficit cured, 400,000 extra jobs created in the economy and youth unemployment halved since we came to power demonstrates that we have a pretty good record. If the hon. Lady wants to quote the Transport and General and the GMB at me, she should hear what they say about the previous Tory Government.

Point of Order

3.31 pm

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Is there any way in which you can protect the rights of Back Benchers during Prime Minister's Question Time? You will see from the Order Paper that we got to Question 6. I realise that you called hon. Members who are not in the frame, but are you satisfied that Back Benchers are getting a full share during that half an hour, bearing in mind that we are likely to be in the frame only two or three times a year if we table questions every Wednesday? Will you consider that matter, because I believe that Back Benchers are not receiving our full rights within that half an hour?

Madam Speaker: I thought that it was important for the House and the country to hear the exchanges between the two Front Benchers today, but I am concerned that I am not able to call Back Benchers at Prime Minister's Question Time to the extent that I would like. The questions are too long and the answers are too long. It is unfair for Front Benchers to take up so much time when Back Benchers have a right to question the Prime Minister. The Leader of the Opposition is perfectly entitled to six questions, and I make that clear, but I should like questions to be much more brisk and I certainly seek brisker answers so that I can give Back Benchers a fair deal at Prime Minister's Question Time.

BILL PRESENTED

Employment Relations

Mr. Secretary Byers, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Secretary Prescott, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Straw, Mr. Secretary Blunkett, Mr. Secretary Dewar, Mr. Secretary Darling, Mr. Secretary Michael and Mr. Ian McCartney, presented a Bill to amend the law relating to employment, to trade unions and to employment agencies and businesses: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed [Bill 36].

Prophylactic Mastectomy Registry

3.33 pm

Ms Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to establish a United Kingdom registry of women who have undergone prophylactic mastectomy surgery.

Prophylactic mastectomy covers two types of operation whereby healthy breasts are removed in an attempt to prevent the development of breast cancer. Breast cancer is an emotive issue and any proposals associated with its diagnosis and treatment need careful consideration if they are to assist women and not give rise to greater fears. I am confident that the small measure that I am proposing is responsible and in the public good.

My interest is both personal and scientific. Like so many people—MPs are no exception—I have breast cancer in my family and I receive regular screening in the NHS. I also have an interest in genetics, having spent the early years of my professional life studying and working on that subject at Imperial college, albeit with micro-organisms, not people.

Breast cancer is the most common form of cancer in women, with one in 12 women developing the disease and more than 34,000 new cases diagnosed in the UK each year.

Awareness of breast cancer is high thanks to the numerous campaigns mounted by women's organisations and the cancer charities. Furthermore, recent statistics show that there has been an improvement in breast cancer survival rates in all European countries, including the United Kingdom, as a result of improvements in treatment. However, the more we women take charge of our own health, and the better informed we become, the more difficult it is for the medical profession to give advice.

There are no absolute predictions to be made about the development of this disease. All that women can expect is to receive advice based on the most comprehensive data that can be gathered. Most women are aware that a family history of breast cancer is likely to be significant, and there is a growing awareness that it is possible to develop the disease because of an inherited genetic abnormality.

Only 5 to 10 per cent. of breast cancers are thought to be the result of genetic mutations, yet worried women with a family history form a disproportionately large number of those referred to specialist breast clinics. Most will not actually have an increased risk because their close relative will not be carrying a mutant gene, but there is no simple or sure way of knowing. Some of the genes responsible have been identified; many others remain to be discovered.

The women who are most likely to be at risk of carrying an abnormal gene often have either a mother or sister diagnosed with breast cancer in their early 30s or 40s, plus several other members of the family similarly affected. If a young woman with breast cancer is found to have a genetic mutation, it is reasonable to test whether close relatives have inherited the risk, of which there is a 50:50 chance.

In those circumstances, half the women tested will be reassured that they do not have the susceptibility of their mother or sister, but the other half will be told that they

have a genetic mutation which predisposes them to a breast cancer risk over a lifetime of 56 per cent. What are those women to do? What are the many women with strong family histories but no genetic screening to do?

Some will feel able to live with the risk, accept close medical surveillance or enter into a trial preventive drug programme such as that carried out with tamoxifen, but, increasingly, women in high-risk categories are undertaking the most radical preventive action of all—they are having both healthy breasts surgically removed.

I have no doubt that, on the basis of the available evidence, those women—we believe that they number between 200 and 500 a year in the United Kingdom—are making an entirely rational decision. As one of them told columnist Jenni Murray in *The Express*:

"I can live without my breasts but I don't want to die because of them."

The stark truth is that no one can be certain that those drastic measures, which carry with them risk and trauma, will guarantee a lifetime free of breast cancer. It is for that reason that I am introducing a Bill to establish a UK-wide register of all women who undergo preventive mastectomy. The register would record who had the operations, where and for what reason. Over time, such a register would enable consultants to give women a precise statistical account of the effectiveness of those preventive operations.

The proposal for such a registry comes not originally from me, but from one of the UK's most eminent breast cancer consultants, Professor Ian Fentiman, of Guy's hospital. It is his view that nothing less than a national register will enable us to gain a full picture of the value of those operations.

The only available data come from a retrospective study of 639 women who underwent bilateral prophylactic mastectomy in the United States at the Mayo clinic between 1960 and 1993. Professor Fentiman believes that that study is too small to give dependable statistics that would allow surgeons to compare the efficacy of the different forms of operation involved. Furthermore, and more significantly, that survey was conducted on women who were treated before genetic testing was a reality.

I see no alternative to a UK register of those operations, and a compulsory register at that. Such compulsory notification does not break new ground. We already have a national cancer registry into which details of cancer diagnoses are entered. Pathologists, who are already familiar with such record keeping, would simply be required to record details of the preventive operations in a similar way. Once a registry of all prophylactic mastectomies had been set up and linked to a register of all breast cancer patients, we would have the means of properly assessing preventive mastectomy.

In addition to my sponsors in the House, to whom I am extremely grateful, my proposal has the support of Imperial Cancer Research, the UK Breast Cancer Coalition and the Royal College of Nursing.

Women who are seeking genetic testing and having to make the decision whether or not to undergo mastectomy are frightened and uncertain. We owe it to those women and to their families to use every means at our disposal to make that decision as informed as possible. The very least that surgeons should be able to offer them is advice based on proper statistics and proper research. A national registry of prophylactic mastectomies would be a first and vital step towards achieving that and aiding all of us—our scientists, our surgeons and women ourselves—in defeating this pernicious disease.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Ms Joan Ruddock, Ms Judith Church, Mr. Frank Doran, Dr. Ian Gibson, Dr. Evan Harris, Miss Julie Kirkbride, Dr. Ashok Kumar, Ms Jackie Lawrence, Mrs. Alice Mahon, Laura Moffatt, Ms Julie Morgan and Ms Dari Taylor.

Prophylactic Mastectomy Registry

Ms Joan Ruddock accordingly presented a Bill to establish a United Kingdom registry of women who have undergone prophylactic mastectomy surgery: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 26 February, and to be printed [Bill 37].

Opposition Day

[4TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Terrorist Mutilations (Northern Ireland)

Madam Speaker: I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister. I remind the House that Back-Bench speeches must be limited to 15 minutes.

3.44 pm

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): I beg to move,

That this House condemns the alarming increase in the numbers of terrorist beatings, mutilations, shootings, cases of intimidation and instances of people being forced to leave their homes in Northern Ireland; notes that these are being carried out by organisations whose political representatives backed the Belfast Agreement; further notes that these continued attacks are clear breaches of the Belfast Agreement that required a commitment to exclusively democratic and peaceful methods and that terrorist ceasefires had to be complete and unequivocal; recalls that the Prime Minister said that for terrorist organisations to benefit from prisoner release schemes there must be an end of violence including bombings, killings and beatings; and calls upon Her Majesty's Government to use its powers contained in the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998 to halt the early release of terrorist prisoners until violence in Northern Ireland has ended in all its forms.

It is the duty of the House to debate the serious issue of the mutilations, torture and beatings, which are increasing in Northern Ireland. I know that I speak for every hon. Member who has taken his or her place in the Chamber in saying that this House unequivocally condemns those horrendous, nauseating and brutal attacks.

I shall set the scene by giving some statistics that have been prepared by Families Against Intimidation and Terror, a non-sectarian organisation that is doing marvellous work to help the victims of such mutilations and beatings, giving them hope, succour and, at times, protection and, sadly, at other times, spiriting them out of the country to safety.

By 23 January this year, there had been six so-called loyalist shootings and four IRA shootings, 15 loyalist terrorist beatings and 12 IRA terrorist beatings, 37 loyalist terrorist instances of intimidation and 22 IRA intimidations, and the loyalists had forced 33 people into exile away from their homes in Northern Ireland, and the IRA, 29. Those figures illustrate much, but illustrate first that there is absolutely no difference in the evil and violence, whether from republicans in the shape of the IRA and splinter groups, or so-called loyalist paramilitaries, and that they commit their dreadful acts in roughly equal number.

Some suggestion has emanated from Downing street today that, somehow, the beatings, mutilations and torture have been reduced in number and are diminishing. I wish that that were so. Families Against Intimidation and Terror tells us—I have no reason to doubt its figures—that, in 1996, there were 501 such attacks; in 1997, 388; last year, 500; and, by 23 January this year, already 158.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. MacKay: I shall in a moment; I want to finish this point. The discrepancy arises from the fact that, as the Secretary of State and others will be aware, following many cases of intimidation and torture, people dare not go to the authorities or the police, and certainly do not go through the courts. Therefore, FAIT has more accurate and up-to-date figures than, sadly, the Royal Ulster Constabulary can possibly have.

Mr. Prentice: The right hon. Gentleman has answered my question, which was to ask him to explain the variation in the figures.

Mr. MacKay: Another point needs to be made at the beginning of the debate, on which I know there will be no dispute between the Secretary of State and myself. We are not talking about punishment beatings. For my constituents in Bracknell, the term "punishment beating" sounds like a modest extension of neighbourhood watch—at the very worst some vigilante group modestly beating up drug dealers or vandals. Let us make absolutely clear what is going on in Northern Ireland. We are talking of mutilation, and of beatings in which every bone in the victim's body is deliberately broken. It is intimidation of the very worst sort, and often leads to exile. Let us ask the media and anybody else discussing those foul acts not to call them punishment beatings, or even so-called punishment beatings.

Paramilitaries on both sides of the sectarian divide—those evil men—would like us to believe that the victims are often drug dealers, paedophiles or others of an antisocial nature. That is occasionally so, but, more often, it is not. They are innocent victims of brutal, evil men.

Even if that were not true, and even if the majority of victims were not innocent, it cannot be right in a democracy, and in our country, for any group to take it upon itself to be the police, the judge, the jury and the executioner. I know that all hon. Members in the Chamber will want to send that message, loud and clear, to those evil psychopaths.

Mr. Robin Corbett (Birmingham, Erdington): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that those allegations should not be discussed across the Dispatch Boxes of this House, but should be deposited with the Royal Ulster Constabulary? Does he also agree that the agreement that was signed up to on Good Friday gives the best prospect for the people of Northern Ireland to have such matters settled in the way in which they are settled in the rest of the United Kingdom, or is he saying that his contribution is to try to pull away one of the planks of that agreement, at the risk of bringing the whole lot down? How would that serve the people of both parts of Ireland?

Mr. MacKay: That was an unusually ill-thought-out contribution from a senior Member of the House.

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): Answer him.

Mr. MacKay: I shall answer the hon. Gentleman directly: I believe, and have said so continually since Good Friday last year, that the Belfast agreement is the best hope for lasting peace and a settlement in Northern Ireland. That is why my party whole-heartedly supports it.

The second question asked by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett)—

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. MacKay: No, there is a second question, which needs to be answered.

Of course, in a perfect world, I would require any victim of crime to go to the police. If a constituent came to my office in Bracknell and said that something had happened to him, I would immediately say, "Go down to the police station." With the greatest respect, I say to the hon. Member for Erdington, "Life ain't like that in Northern Ireland." I could take him to a significant number of people, in both communities, who dare not go to the police and who have been brutally beaten. That is a sad fact.

If the hon. Gentleman is saying that, somehow, I am wrong to raise those matters on the Floor of the House, I profoundly disagree.

Mr. Corbett *indicated dissent.*

Mr. MacKay: I am delighted to see the hon. Gentleman shaking his head.

Mr. Robathan: Is there not a curious dichotomy? On the one hand, we hear Martin McGuinness claim on the radio this morning that those people who are being mutilated and viciously beaten up are in some way criminals, without any form of trial having taking place. On the other, the Secretary of State says, understandably, that she has no evidence and cannot bring the perpetrators of those crimes to court. Does that not reveal that the rule of law does not run in large parts of Northern Ireland? There is a rule of fear, and the Secretary of State knows as well as we do that it is enforced by people who are pretending to talk peace.

Mr. MacKay: My hon. Friend gives another good example of Mr. Martin McGuinness and his friends misleading the public and this House by giving the impression that they are merely a vigilante group that is trying to do good for its community. All right hon. and hon. Members who have taken their seats in this House know better than that gentleman, who has failed to take his seat.

Since 23 January, matters have got worse. There was a brutal double kneecapping in east Belfast by loyalist terrorists on Monday night. An equally obnoxious crime was committed, almost certainly by republican terrorists, in west Belfast last night. News is coming in of the death, outside Newry, of Eamon Collins, the author of "Killing Rage". The House will recall that he was a senior member of the IRA command who turned informer and had to flee to the mainland for a number of years. Eighteen months ago, he courageously returned to his home town of Newry, but he has now been killed. So it goes on, and it gets worse.

Let me be more specific about a few recent cases. The House will recall that I raised the case of John Brown during a debate in the autumn. John Brown is 79 and lives in a small flat in Belfast. Members of the IRA came to his flat and kneecapped him because, they alleged, he was a paedophile. Unfortunately for Mr. Brown, the IRA had gone to the wrong house: the alleged paedophile lived in a flat next door. That poor man will never walk properly again.

More recently, there have been other dreadful cases. One occurred within the last fortnight, in Strabane. Let me read from an article by Martin Fletcher, published in *The Times* on Thursday, 14 January.

> "Six masked IRA men burst into Noel Diver's house last Saturday, pulled the 24-year-old from the sofa and beat him with baseball bats and an iron bar. It was several minutes before they realised that they had the wrong house and the wrong man.
>
> They left without a word, went next door, seized 22-year-old Michael Brennan, and offered a running commentary as they smashed his limbs.
>
> 'Wait till you hear this one break,' one shouted as he swung a baseball bat down at Mr. Brennan's arm. 'You're a big man now,' said another as they left their victim groaning on his kitchen floor.
>
> This is the story of everyday life on one of the many housing estates in Northern Ireland where republican or loyalist paramilitary groups rule through terror, where the police venture only in armoured Land Rovers, and where neither the ceasefire nor the Good Friday accord has made a jot of difference."

No one, but no one, here will have been other than moved by the pictures of Andrew Peden, who—brutalised beyond belief, and left for dead—somehow survived, but lost both his legs. *The Times* reported on Wednesday, 20 January:

> "The Pedens have received no compensation . . . Mrs Peden has given up her job to nurse her husband round the clock. 'I don't know what it's like having a night's sleep,' she said. 'He cries out every night for help. He relives it every night. If he gets an hour's sleep that's it. It's wrecked our family.'
>
> She knows the men who attacked her husband, and sees them when she shops. 'When they see me they drop their heads or go to the other side of the streets,' she said. 'They are ashamed. They are just evil men. I just hope God repays them.'"

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Everyone condemns such acts by so-called freedom fighters for republicanism or unionism. They are outright thugs, as everyone recognises, and as is recognised in the Government amendment. However, what guarantee can there be that, if the policy advocated by the Opposition were implemented by the Government, the beatings and thuggery would slow down or end? Is there not a danger that they would increase, and that the peace agreement could be torn to pieces? Surely we should exercise judgment and recognise that the present position is better than a return to bombing, while ensuring that the police use every effort to hunt down thugs who commit the kind of intimidation about which the right hon. Gentleman has been reading?

Mr. MacKay: The hon. Gentleman and I agree that such beatings and mutilations are abhorrent. Like me, the hon. Gentleman has spoken out in debate after debate in the Chamber. It is indeed a matter of judgment, as the Prime Minister has told us from the Dispatch Box several times in recent weeks. Our judgment—I shall say more about this shortly—is that it is far more likely that the beatings will stop if the terrorist prisoners are no longer released. The pressure in the terrorist communities on

[Mr. MacKay]

both sides of the sectarian divide to "get the boys out" will be huge, and we know from past experience that they can turn the tap of violence on and off to suit themselves.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. MacKay: I want to make some progress, but I will give way to the hon. Gentleman in due course, because he takes a keen interest in debates on this subject.

Who is to blame? In a BBC Radio Ulster interview on 15 January, the Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, Sir Ronnie Flanagan, said:

"I've always said it's not my business to define a cessation of violence or a cessation of military operations, and therefore it's not my business to determine what constitutes a breach of such cessations".

That, incidentally, shows that the Prime Minister inadvertently misled the House last Wednesday when he said that the Chief Constable had said that the ceasefire was still intact. Sir Ronnie went on to say:

"But you will think the wording of these organisations in terms of their announced cessations and they are cessations of military operations. So perhaps they have some distorted, perverted view that this sort of activity doesn't come within the term, 'military operations'".

He also said:

"But there is no doubt whatever that all of these organisations [IRA, UVF, UDA, UFF] including those who purport to be in cessations of military operations, are engaged in this repugnant activity".

In a separate article in *Police Review* on 22 January, he said:

"Notwithstanding the fact that they are adhering to what they define as 'cessations of military operations', this does not mean that the threat they pose has been permanently disposed of. This does not mean that they are inactive. I have no doubt that these 'mainstream' groups continue to be involved in the barbaric activity of mutilations through paramilitary assaults".

There we have it confirmed by the Chief Constable. Those who are responsible for those evil, nauseating acts are the same people who signed up to the Belfast agreement on Good Friday. The House needs no reminding whatever that an essential part of that agreement was the renunciation of violence in all its forms.

I should like to quote from the Prime Minister during the referendum campaign. I, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) and other colleagues campaigned for a yes vote in that referendum and would do so again because, as I said in response to the hon. Member for Erdington the Belfast agreement is the best way forward for the people of Northern Ireland. When the Prime Minister made his speech at the Balmoral showgrounds in Belfast on 14 May last year, he said

"that, again as the Agreement expressly states, the ceasefires are indeed complete and unequivocal: an end to bombings, killings and beatings, claimed or unclaimed; an end to targeting and procurement of weapons; progressive abandonment and dismantling of paramilitary structures actively directing and promoting violence".

That is also our definition of a cessation of violence. It is clearly not happening. He went on to say:

"These factors provide evidence upon which to base an overall judgment—a judgment which will necessarily become more rigorous over time".

I concur entirely and the Secretary of State has made similar remarks at the Dispatch Box in response to me and to other hon. Members.

In the same speech, the Prime Minister said:

"the only prisoners whose cases can even be considered by the Independent Review Commission are those belonging to organisations which are observing a total and unequivocal ceasefire".

That is why, in a supply day on a similar subject before Christmas, we moved a motion on the Floor of the House saying that terrorist prisoners should not be released any more until there was substantial and verifiable decommissioning. It is absolutely clear that the ceasefire is not holding because violence is continuing at pace and increasing. Violent, dreadful crimes are being committed.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Does my right hon. Friend recall that, only eight days before the speech to which he has just referred, the Prime Minister said in response to questioning by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition:

"It is essential that organisations that want to benefit from the early release of prisoners should give up violence."—[*Official Report*, 6 May 1998; Vol. 311, c. 711.]

In the light of the fact that that commitment has not been honoured, is it not essential that those releases should be halted until terrorism stops and decommissioning starts?

Mr. MacKay: There are many people who voted yes in the referendum—whom we rightly encouraged them to do so—because of the assurances freely given from the Dispatch Box by the Prime Minister to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition in May and to the people of Northern Ireland in the speech at the agricultural showground to which I have just referred.

I am trying to keep this speech as low key as possible, but I have to report that many of those people feel badly let down by the Prime Minister, and I can understand why. I believe that there is no choice for the Government but to have the agreement, which we support, implemented in full. An absolutely vital aspect of that agreement is that violence should be renounced for good and that crimes should not be committed. Instead, violent and vicious crimes are still being committed.

Mr. Stephen Day (Cheadle) *rose—*

Dr. Godman *rose—*

Mr. MacKay: I will give way first to the hon. Member for Greenock and Port Glasgow. He is going to tell me that I have got his constituency wrong again. I will then give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mr. Day).

Dr. Godman: The right hon. Gentleman is immensely polite but awfully forgetful. My constituency is now Greenock and Inverclyde.

The Opposition's motion ends with a demand for a halt to the early release of terrorist prisoners until all violence ends. Will the right hon. Gentleman specify what groups of prisoners should be denied early release or is he talking about all scheduled prisoners?

Mr. MacKay: I apologise for getting the hon. Gentleman's constituency wrong again. I do not know what happened to Port Glasgow, but I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will tell me privately.

The answer is straightforward. The Chief Constable and other observers believe that all the paramilitaries who signed the Good Friday agreement, both loyalist and republican, are involved in those awful beatings and mutilations.

Mr. Corbett: Where is the evidence?

Mr. MacKay: The evidence is coming from the Chief Constable. The hon. Member for Erdington may shake his head, but I do not intend to repeat myself because many other hon. Members want to participate in the debate. I have quoted extensively from the Chief Constable and I thought that he had made the position abundantly clear. The evidence comes not just from the Chief Constable but from other interested observers whose reputations are high and whose courage is outstanding. Nobody doubts that the evidence is there.

Mr. Day: My right hon. Friend has talked about the desirability of the Government recognising that those who claim to have signed up to peace are not carrying out their pledges in practice. Will he include in the description of those people not just those who claim to be the official IRA? Will he confirm that, in fact, Continuity IRA and the Real IRA are nothing but a mask to allow certain people in Sinn Fein to claim that the beatings are not carried out by the IRA when we know full well that Sinn Fein-IRA, Real IRA and Continuity IRA are one and the same?

Mr. MacKay: I am not sure that I can confirm that. That is a matter that my hon. Friend will have to pursue with the Secretary of State and Ministers. However, it is important that the House does not discriminate in any shape or form when condemning terrorism, from whatever side of the sectarian divide and whichever misguided organisation is involved.

We have now established without any reasonable doubt that republican and loyalist parties that signed the Good Friday agreement are behind the atrocities, beatings and mutilations. They are in breach of the agreement. Last summer, we passed the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998. Section 3(9) says that, when specifying organisations, the Secretary of State shall take into account whether that organisation

"(a) is committed to the use now and in the future of only democratic and peaceful means to achieve its objectives"—

clearly, that is not so—

"(b) has ceased to be involved in any acts of violence or of preparation for violence"—

clearly not—

"(c) is directing or promoting acts of violence"—

they clearly are—

"(d) is co-operating fully with any Commission of the kind referred to in section 7 of the Northern Ireland Arms Decommissioning Act 1997 in implementing the Decommissioning section of the agreement reached at the multi-party talks on Northern Ireland, set out in Command Paper 3883"—

they are clearly not doing so.

The Secretary of State and I were in dispute when the Bill went through. I shall not rake over the arguments, but she knows that I should have preferred the Bill to have said that she had to stop the prisoner releases if any of those conditions were breached. She persuaded the House, mainly thanks to the Government's majority, that it was better that she should just take those conditions into account. That is why we voted against the Third Reading.

I warned in July that there was a real possibility that all the conditions would be breached by the paramilitaries, but the Secretary of State would still be within her rights to say that she was not convinced and that it was better on balance to allow prisoners to be released. That is a great pity. I have shown that the paramilitaries are in breach of the agreement on all four counts, so there is no excuse for letting any more terrorist prisoners out early.

In the five months since the Act became law, the Government have released nearly 250 terrorist prisoners early, out of a total of approximately 400 who might be eligible. I suggest that the Government have been more than generous. I did not oppose the early release of some terrorist prisoners, because that was part of the agreement, which we supported. I fully understood that the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister had to show the paramilitaries their good faith and demonstrate that they were prepared to implement their side of the agreement.

However, once that had been done, some sign was needed that the violence had stopped and the decommissioning had started. Neither has happened. Not an ounce of semtex or a single gun has been handed in by any of the paramilitaries that signed up to the Belfast Good Friday agreement. As I have shown—more importantly, so have the Chief Constable of the RUC and Families Against Intimidation and Terror—the number of beatings and mutilations has increased. We believe that there should be a halt to prisoner releases until there is substantial and verifiable decommissioning of illegally held arms and explosives and until it is clear that violence has ceased once and for all.

It is the duty of the Opposition to speak out when there is a fundamental wrong. The Secretary of State and the Prime Minister know that we understand the advantages to Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom of a bipartisan approach, which has been in place for several years, but we have always said that we cannot give the Government a blank cheque, just as the Labour Opposition failed to give us a blank cheque when they did not support us on the renewal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act year in and year out. We shall speak out if we believe that the agreement, which we and the Government support, is not being implemented.

I shall speak out loudly when the victims are innocent people, often with a limited education and difficult job prospects in the poorest estates across the Province. Do Labour Members honestly believe that action would not have been taken if there had been mutilations, tortures and beatings in some of the leafy suburbs of south Belfast or the commuter lands of north Down? Of course action would have been taken, because there are articulate and important people there, but the poor bloody infantry are being brushed under the carpet and ignored.

Through the work of Families Against Intimidation and Terror and of several journalists, the House can now bring the matter to wider attention. It is time for the House to demand that the Government act. The best way of acting is to stop any further release of terrorist prisoners.

4.15 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Marjorie Mowlam): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

'condemns absolutely the barbaric practice of paramilitary attacks in Northern Ireland, condemns the human and material cost of these assaults and the contempt they demonstrate for the rule of law; notes the commitment made by all parties who endorsed the Good Friday Agreement to "the protection and vindication of the human rights of all"; welcomes the Government's determination to fulfil its responsibilities under the Good Friday Agreement in this as in every other area; and calls on all people, parties and organisations to use all their influence to bring these attacks to an immediate stop, to help the police in any way they can, and to work to build on the Good Friday Agreement to create a society in Northern Ireland where such attacks are a thing of the past.'.

I presume that the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) would apply his point about working versus middle class to the previous Government, too, as the policy has not changed, so it is not in that sense a party matter. I assure him that the Government have done more to help victims than the previous Government did. We put money into a memorial fund; we set up an educational bursary to help children; and we are putting together a trauma unit. Through concrete, specific actions, rather than words, we are doing everything that we can to ease the pain and suffering that families are going through.

I say to the right hon. Member for Bracknell, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said to the Leader of the Opposition last week, that I completely share his disgust at those attacks and that I share many of his concerns. There is no difference between us, nor indeed between any Members of Parliament, in our condemnation of those barbaric acts. The question that we all face is how best to bring them to an end.

I would argue that the Government are doing everything that they can to answer that question in good faith. There have been thousands of those attacks during the past 30 years. Punishment assaults, beatings, shootings and mutilations have been an unacceptable feature of life in Northern Ireland for far too long, but condemnation alone is not enough. Words are not enough; action is needed on the underlying problems.

For 30 years, Governments of both parties have tried to stop paramilitary assaults, through extra security measures, appeals to the public to help the police, and television advertising. Governments have condemned, but the attacks have continued. The numbers that are available do not tell the full story; as the right hon. Gentleman said, many people are too frightened to report attacks and go to the police with the evidence.

Northern Ireland has suffered from a crisis of confidence: a lack of confidence between communities, between politicians, and among the institutions of Government and those charged with maintaining law. Groups have been committed to violence to achieve their ends. That crisis of confidence has to be addressed, and that is what the Good Friday agreement is designed to do, by creating structures that will give the communities the confidence to say no, once and for all, to those who mutilate and to the vigilantes carrying out the acts that the right hon. Gentleman described.

With the Good Friday agreement, the people of Northern Ireland are now closer than they have ever been to achieving that, and that is what we risk losing if we go down the route suggested by the right hon. Gentleman. He made it clear that the motion is based on the view that the paramilitary assaults mean that the ceasefires are not intact. The status of the ceasefires is a judgment that I have to make in the round, taking full account of the best security advice available to me.

My judgment is that the ceasefires are being maintained, a view that the right hon. Gentleman accepted when we last debated this issue in the House. He said:

"The Secretary of State has the benefit of the best security advice available, and it is that those organisations are maintaining a ceasefire. I accept that".—[*Official Report*, 9 December 1998; Vol. 322, c. 330.]

I discuss these issues frequently with the Chief Constable of the RUC, and while the overall judgment is mine—I take responsibility for it—I have no reason to believe that he disagrees with my interpretation.

The motion argues that one aspect of the agreement—early prisoner releases—should be halted until all forms of violence end, and that it would then be more likely that the attacks would stop. I do not believe, given the advice that I have that the ceasefires continue to hold, that if I rewrote the agreement, unilaterally stopping one part—prisoner releases—the process would stay intact. I could also, I believe, face challenges in the courts. I accept that the balance is difficult and, like my predecessors, I have difficult judgments to make.

Mr. Ken Maginnis (Fermanagh and South Tyrone): How does the Secretary of State reconcile what she has just said with her statement in this House on 10 June last year? She said then that

"if circumstances deteriorate in Northern Ireland, the programme of release will be stopped and no prisoners will be released . . . during the referendum campaign, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said that if parties are to benefit from accelerated release, their commitment to democratic, non-violent means must be established in an objective, meaningful and verifiable way".—[*Official Report*, 10 June 1998; Vol. 313, c. 1083.]

Marjorie Mowlam: We are talking about a process that will not happen overnight—it is not like turning a switch on and off. It takes time for the process to develop, and I believe that that is what we are doing now. [HON. MEMBERS: "Nine months."] Yes, nine months—a short time in terms of the years of violence that have gone before.

Decisions in terms of the agreement and the ceasefire are based on evidence from the security forces, the police and elsewhere. I have to make the judgment, and I have judged that the ceasefire is intact. I have no reason to believe that the Chief Constable disagrees with that interpretation.

Ms Margaret Moran (Luton, South): Is the information from the RUC Chief Constable in accordance with the actions of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State? Does she agree that it is important that we do not undermine the RUC, which has a difficult job in identifying the perpetrators of violence and bringing them to justice?

Marjorie Mowlam: I get evidence from the police and other security organisations, but I make the judgment myself. It is not the Chief Constable—I take responsibility. I consult the Chief Constable regularly,

and I have no reason to believe that he disagrees with my conclusions. My hon. Friend mentioned how difficult it is for the police to do their job, and there is no doubt about that. We ought to commend the police. In the Markets area of Belfast recently, for example, the local community police officer received a UK-wide award. Efforts are being made to break the vicious cycle, and that is the difficulty that we are faced with.

Mr. MacKay: The Secretary of State is right to say that the final decision ought to be hers and not the Chief Constable's—the whole House accepts that. However, does she accept that I gave direct and detailed quotes from Sir Ronnie Flanagan's interview with Radio Ulster during my speech? He said again and again, categorically—as he did in the *Police Review*—that the paramilitaries who had signed up to the Belfast Agreement were the perpetrators of the dreadful tortures, attacks and beatings that we are debating today.

Marjorie Mowlam: Sir Ronnie said that those groups were involved, but he did not go on to say that there was evidence to charge individuals, organisations or members within those organisations. If there is evidence, the Chief Constable will use it to initiate prosecutions. However, there is no evidence. I must work on evidence, and that is my judgment. I deal not in hearsay or in rumour, but in evidence. I have not seen evidence to support a conclusion different from the one that I have reached.

Mr. MacKay: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Marjorie Mowlam: I wish to make a little more progress, but I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman later.

I readily accept that the balance is a difficult one. I, like my predecessors, have difficult judgments to make. Did the noble Lord Mayhew abandon his new law—as I am being asked to do—letting terrorist prisoners out early in 1996? He did not, even though that was the worst year on record for paramilitary assaults, and even though the IRA ended its ceasefire and we had the bomb at Canary Wharf, the London bus bombing, the explosion at Osnabrück and other incidents.

Lord Mayhew could have abandoned that law. He could have reversed his earlier decision. He did not, because his judgment told him that the process of working for a lasting peace required a different course of action. We supported him in that judgment, because we thought the same—and we still do.

However, I do not want to dwell on the past. It is better to face up to the future.

Mr. MacKay: It is very important for the House to be absolutely clear about everything that is said today, as many people will be listening to the debate. The Secretary of State said a moment ago that she had to have evidence before there could be convictions. That is not anybody else's interpretation of the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998, which provides that she has to make a judgment on the information that she receives from the security forces and elsewhere.

Will the Secretary of State correct what she said, as it is not true that she can decertify paramilitary organisations only when there are convictions in court? She knows full well how difficult the intimidation of witnesses and victims makes it for the police to get convictions. I should be grateful for a clarification, as I think that she inadvertently misled the House.

Marjorie Mowlam: I did not inadvertently mislead the House. I said that, if there was sufficient evidence to permit prosecution, I have no doubt that the Chief Constable and the RUC would prosecute. I am not saying that the evidence presented to me by the Chief Constable has to go to a court of law, but I have to make a judgment about it. I have made my conclusion clear.

We must rely on the facts, not delude ourselves with half-answers. The task facing the RUC, with Garda support, in attempting to bring to book and to court those responsible for the Omagh bomb is difficult enough. It does not need to be made all the more difficult by someone threatening to act unwisely under the privileges of this House. Equally, it is difficult enough for both the police and the Government to deal with the issue of paramilitary assaults without having to cope with unhelpful or misleading speculation.

As I have just made clear to the right hon. Member for Bracknell, we must stick to the facts and to the rule of law, not to the law of the latest rumour.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): On the "Today" programme this morning, the Secretary of State said that she did not really know whether she had the legal powers to deal with the type of situation that we are discussing. However, at Question Time, the Prime Minister said emphatically that she had that legal power. What is the legal nature and character of the problem that she was talking about this morning? Why does she not agree with the Prime Minister?

Marjorie Mowlam: I do agree with the Prime Minister. What I said this morning was that I have legal powers, but they are limited. If a person breaks his or her licence, I can, under the powers of the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998, work with the independent sentences review commission and get the licence revoked by resubmitting that person's name. Under the Good Friday agreement, if I think that the ceasefire is not intact, I can name specific organisations or groups and none of their members who are in prison will be released.

Those are two of my specific powers. It is also possible, under the Good Friday agreement, to stop the whole process. That is what my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister referred to, and he outlined clearly the implications if we took that course of action. If I have evidence against organisations, I will act similarly, but I need that evidence—*[Interruption.]* I need the evidence before I can act.

In response to the debate, I have tried to put the issue in the proper context, but that does not in any way reduce the Government's condemnation of the appalling assaults. I am determined that they should be brought to an end.

The Royal Ulster Constabulary will continue to have the Government's full support in its efforts to bring those responsible to justice. If there is clear evidence that any released prisoner on licence is carrying out attacks, I will suspend the licence and the prisoner will be returned to prison. If I judge that any group's ceasefire is at an end,

[Marjorie Mowlam]

based on that information I will stop its releases. At present, that is not my judgment and that is why the Government cannot support the Opposition motion.

4.30 pm

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): I hope that I will not be too repetitious on some of the points that have already been made, although it is inevitable that one will be. Like the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay), I begin by congratulating Families Against Intimidation and Terror, which has done a tremendous amount of good for many individuals who have been trying to free themselves from the influence of terrorist organisations. It has also done a tremendous amount of good by bringing to the public's attention the full horror of the intimidation, social terrorism, beatings and mutilations that have been going on in parts of Belfast, and from which various elements of polite society have been averting their attention for too long, as the right hon. Gentleman said. Class elements are involved and Labour Members might like to reflect on that too.

I shall start by referring to the death overnight of Mr. Eamon Collins, although it is not yet clear exactly what happened. It is one of those situations in which the police, on discovering that there is perhaps more to it than meets the eye, are rightly taking their time. Mr. Collins's background is well known. He is a former member of the IRA, who gave evidence against them, broke from them and published a book, which has been mentioned. In recent months, he has been an increasingly brilliant critic of the Republicans, particularly in the columns of the *Irish News*, the main nationalist newspaper in Northern Ireland. Only a few months ago, that resulted in his home on the outskirts of Newry being burnt down under suspicious circumstances, so fears that the death was also suspicious are inevitable, but we must not jump to conclusions.

At this stage, it looks as though it is another killing and that the republican movement is responsible. It follows on from other killings, in particular the Kearney killing, towards the end of last year; and I wonder about the timing, given the way in which the Secretary of State was snubbed by Sinn Fein-IRA earlier this week.

A few weeks ago, I had the honour—I use the term advisedly—of meeting Mr. Kearney's mother. She is a lady of republican views, from a republican background, but I take my hat off to her for the courage that she displayed when she went to a shopping centre in west Belfast to confront the man—one of the IRA's leaders in north Belfast—who ordered the killing. She confronted him there in the street and mentioned his name—[HON. MEMBERS: "Name him."] No, I will not give his name, although I did mention it in the House some years ago. She went up to him and said, "Why did you order my son's killing?" From what she told me of her dealings with the IRA leadership in Belfast in general, there is no doubt about the fact that that killing was ordered by the IRA leadership. It was not some low-level activity. It was not even the work of that north Belfast commander. The action was approved at what the IRA would call brigade staff level in Belfast.

I am sure that the facts that are known to Mr. Kearney's mother are also known to the police and are part of the reason why the Chief Constable of the RUC told society in Northern Ireland that he has no doubt that the organisations—as organisations—are engaged in such attacks. Although there is a tendency to focus on the Republican movement because it is failing to carry out its other obligations, we must remind ourselves and the House that Loyalist organisations are also involved.

In recent months, the number of beatings and shootings by Loyalist organisations has outstripped those by Republicans. I have my suspicions as to the motives, particularly of the Ulster Volunteer Force. I think that I am right in saying that the majority of Loyalist beatings, shootings and murders—including a recent murder—were carried out by the Ulster Volunteer Force. I suspect that there is a particular political motivation for the escalation of UVF beatings and shootings. However, that will not be news to the Secretary of State, who is aware of these matters.

I should like to comment on three things said during Northern Ireland questions last Wednesday that disturbed me greatly then and have been repeated here today. First, I shall quote the Secretary of State. She has qualified the position somewhat today, but last Wednesday she said:

> "I assure the hon. and learned Gentleman that the Chief Constable's words were generic and that he said clearly that, in his opinion, all groups were still on ceasefire."—[*Official Report*, 20 January 1999; Vol. 323, c. 898.]

That is a more categoric misleading of the House than the subsequent words of the Prime Minister to which the right hon. Member for Bracknell referred. As the Secretary of State said today, that is not the position nor is it what the Chief Constable said.

Last week's questions referred to what the Chief Constable had said in an interview that was broadcast on 15 January. I apologise for the repetition, but I remind the House of his precise words:

> "I've always said it's not my business to define a cessation of violence or a cessation of military operations; and therefore it's not my business to determine what constitutes a breach of such cessations. But you will think of the wording of these organisations in terms of their announced cessations and they are indeed cessations of military operations. So perhaps they have some distorted, perverted view that this sort of barbaric activity doesn't come within the term 'military operation'."

The Chief Constable was saying two things. First, he said that it was not his business to determine what constitutes a breach. I am glad that the Secretary of State has clarified that. The Chief Constable does not determine. He gives views as to the circumstances and informs people of the intelligence that he receives. The Secretary of State was in error last week when she said that the Chief Constable had said that the IRA and others were not in breach of the ceasefire. Furthermore, on 15 January the Chief Constable was saying that the organisations—particularly the IRA, as the terms of the Loyalist declaration were slightly different—in declaring their cessation said that they were ceasing military operations.

One can say that the IRA's cessation is intact only if one accepts that the present actions of the IRA are not military operations. The organisation is carrying out beatings, shootings and killings. One can say that there is not a breach of its cessation only if one classifies those beatings, shootings and killings as not being military operations; and that is what the Chief Constable described on 15 January as a "distorted, perverted view". So the view that the Secretary of State expressed at the Dispatch

Box today is tenable and justified only on the basis of what the Chief Constable has described as a "distorted, perverted view".

I cannot judge what the Chief Constable has said to the Secretary of State in private, but only what he has said in public. He has described the only possible basis of the view that the Secretary of State has expressed as distorted and perverted.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): The right hon. Gentleman makes a thoroughly compelling case. Anyone who does not live in Wonderland knows perfectly well that there has indeed been a breach. Will he tell the House what, in his view, would be the consequences for the Good Friday agreement if the proposal of the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes), that the release of terrorist prisoners be slowed down, were carried out?

Mr. Trimble: That is the primary issue we are debating today and, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I shall develop my argument as I wish, although I shall deal with that serious point in turn.

The second matter that has been mentioned is the question of evidence and how one should act. By the end of the Secretary of State's speech, we were beginning to get a clear picture of the position, which is quite simple. To bring criminal proceedings in court, one needs evidence in the normal way; that evidence is difficult, albeit not impossible, to obtain and few prosecutions have been brought. However, what we are debating today is entirely different: it is a question of the exercise of a discretion under the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998.

That Act refers to several criteria and gives the Secretary of State a discretion. That discretion has to be exercised on some reasonable basis and with regard to the existing circumstances but, in exercising that discretion, the Secretary of State is not limited in any way to legally admissible evidence; and she is entitled to have regard to the commonly known circumstances in Northern Ireland. In addition, she ought to have regard to the information that reaches her from the police and the security services.

If the police are saying to the Secretary of State, as the Chief Constable has said to the public, that those organisations, as organisations, are involved in acts of violence, there is clearly a sufficient basis in law under that Act for her to act. I repeat, if the Secretary of State is receiving from the Chief Constable an assessment that is consistent with what he says in public, under the Act there is sufficient material to enable her to exercise her discretion to slow down, halt temporarily or even take more comprehensive action in respect of prisoner releases. There is no doubt whatsoever about that.

We need to be clear. Those who talk about there being no evidence are obscuring the picture. They might not fully understand the situation, but they are focusing on the wrong point. We must focus instead on the discretion that the Secretary of State has under the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act and that she can exercise. I note that she said a few moments ago that, if there was evidence against organisations, she would act. I trust that that is the case.

In the current situation, "evidence" does not solely mean legally admissible evidence; the term includes the intelligence that the Secretary of State receives from the police, the Army and the security services. The right hon. Lady would have great difficulty convincing anybody in Northern Ireland that she is not in receipt of intelligence that indicates that the organisations are involved in acts of violence.

Mr. Robert McCartney (North Down): I can confirm that the Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary has personally stated to me on several occasions that he has not the slightest doubt that the Provisional IRA and the UVF are responsible, as organisations, for the vast number of beatings, shootings and mutilations that are carried out in the communities they dominate.

Mr. Trimble: I thank the hon. and learned Gentleman for reinforcing what we all know to be true and what the Chief Constable has stated publicly. The Chief Constable has made similar comments to my colleagues and me on a number of occasions. We cannot know exactly what has passed between the Chief Constable and the Secretary of State, but we have difficulty reconciling what we have been told here with statements that are in the public domain.

My third point relates to what would happen if the suggested action were carried out. I regard as chilling the suggestion made by the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State that, if prisoner releases were slowed down or stopped, the agreement would collapse. It is appalling to suggest that that is the state of affairs. Prisoner releases are part of the agreement, but they are part of the whole, which includes an end to violence and decommissioning. That is why, in the legislation last year, the Government linked releases to decommissioning and an end to violence. If the Government say that they fear that slowing down prisoner releases will jeopardise the agreement, they are saying that the republican and other terrorist organisations can rewrite the agreement at will and that they can continue their illegal activities, including beatings and killings, with impunity. That is an appalling state of affairs to have reached.

The statements made last week and repeated this week chill the heart of many people in Northern Ireland. We have been here before. We were here a year ago. The present situation is similar to the situation then. We know what the terrorists are doing. They are trying to push out the envelope and see how far they can go. They are trying to lay a basis for an attack on the RUC later in the context of the Patten report. They are also trying, as they did a year ago, to unnerve Unionists and bounce them out of the process.

I remember the killings last year by Direct Action Against Drugs. The Secretary of State twisted and turned, trying to avoid what was obvious and tried to avoid taking action against republicans. Eventually, after a murder in Dunmurry, action became unavoidable and the Government screwed themselves up to take action. They excluded Sinn Fein from the talks, regrettably only for two weeks. I ask the Secretary of State to recall the positive consequences that flowed from acting last year. The tap turned off. The DAAD killings stopped. We had a more positive and serious attitude inside the talks, and that contributed to the agreement.

The terrorists are pushing out the envelope again. They are testing the Secretary of State's resolve. So far, she has not shown any resolve or willingness to tackle the

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situation. If she continues to allow the terrorists to push her around, the challenge that will face us all in another month or two will be more difficult. If she follows the good precedent of last year, when the Government resolved themselves to act after the DAAD killings, she will find that the next month or two will go more smoothly.

I hope that the Secretary of State knows that I hope that we manage to maximise the opportunities for society that the agreement presents. I welcome what the right hon. Member for Bracknell said about the need to maximise and take forward the opportunities. The Secretary of State knows that my colleagues and I will make any effort that can be made to carry those opportunities forward successfully.

The Secretary of State should also know that many people in Northern Ireland who have invested hope in the agreement also have a nightmare. The nightmare is that the paramilitary organisations, rather than turn their backs on violence and cross over into democratic society and thus create a new situation in Northern Ireland in which people can live together at ease, will come into the process and corrupt it, continue with their violence and continue the dominance and racketeering that not only affects estates in certain parts of Northern Ireland but goes much wider than that. People have a nightmare that they will then see the very heart of society become corrupted. That nightmare is reinforced by the fear that the RUC will be so emasculated that it is incapable of acting to restrain the paramilitaries.

The paramilitaries have grown quite arrogant and confident. One has only to look at the behaviour of some of their political spokesmen to see that.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman, but I am bound by the 15-minute rule.

4.49 pm

Mr. Seamus Mallon (Newry and Armagh): May I first put in context the remarks that I want to make this evening, and have been making for many years, about violence and all its manifestations. I personally abhor the violence that is under discussion today, all violence that has taken place and the mindset that encourages people to use violence for political means.

Sometimes it is necessary to repeat that because, when one listens to debates, particularly on this issue, it is as though there are different rungs on a ladder corresponding to one's own rectitude or self-righteousness on the issue. However, that has not permeated this debate. I have seen no evidence of the self-righteousness or self-indulgence that is sometimes displayed on this issue. There is genuine concern, which I share. It is right that the issue is debated and that Members are able to put their views, and I have no problem with that.

I also have no problem with coupling my remarks with a gentle word of advice for our discussion on punishment beatings. To lob a petrol bomb through people's window when they are in bed is also a punishment, and it can be lethal. There have been a number of such incidents over the past few weeks. I also gently remind the House that, sometimes, the real punishment meted out by paramilitary groups in the north of Ireland is not physical. People, especially the young, are put under different psychological pressures in a way that is devised to protect the turf, influence or corrosive power of paramilitary groups in their organisations.

I question the wisdom of the motion in the name of the Leader of the Opposition. If that motion were passed and implemented, how would a Secretary of State and a Prime Minister solve the problems of such brutality? How would passing the motion, with the best and most sincere motives, solve the problems? How would that change even the context in which the problems should be solved? Would we or others be debating more and more of those acts of barbarity or different acts of barbarity? I am opposed to the motion for that and other reasons.

The motion has a subterranean political context, which is already evident. Is it not the supreme irony that, at a time when the business and process of politics has been re-established in the north of Ireland, all concentration is on violence? One would have hoped that, in the context of the new agreement, the new beginning and the new approach, we could have been debating other issues—mundane issues, perhaps—such as education, welfare, carers or young people.

Another irony is that when, for the first time in the past 30 years—the lifetime of most people in the north of Ireland—we have a future, concentration on that will be overshadowed again by acts of barbarity. Ask anybody what is happening in the north of Ireland.

Ms Helen Southworth (Warrington, South): The hon. Gentleman might be aware that I asked the Library to research Opposition day debates on Northern Ireland in the previous Parliament. I am concerned because bipartisanship is very important to people in the peace process, and I recognise the importance of that process to people in Northern Ireland. The only Opposition day debate on Northern Ireland held during that time was the joint SDLP, UUP and Conservative Members' debate on the Northern Ireland economy. Is that the sort of debate that the hon. Gentleman wants to happen?

Mr. Mallon: I thank the hon. Lady for that valuable interjection.

It is right to point out that, at a time when the primacy of politics and the political process should be establishing itself apace, the political process is actually partially dormant. What is the focus of concentration? It is the acts of barbarity, a throwback from the past; it is the violence that we have lived with for so long. As politicians, we have to ask ourselves how, in effect, the business of violence is overcoming the business of the political process in circumstances in which the political process should be leading in every sense.

We can ask the same question about the will of the people of the north of Ireland, expressed in a vote of 72 per cent. in the referendum on the agreement. Is that will the will that is being heard in this debate? Is that the will that has been heard in media terms, or is it the will—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The motion deals with good order, but we do not have good order in the Chamber. Let us have good order.

Mr. Mallon: I am sure that extra time will be added, as they say.

The reality is that, by carrying out punishment beatings, or whatever we want to call them, those with hoods—the faceless people—are able to grab attention in a way that the legitimate political process is not. Let us not all fall into the trap that is being set by those in paramilitary organisations.

I am asked whether the passing of this motion would end the brutality. If the release of prisoners were ended, would that end those acts of brutality? I do not believe that it would; I do not believe that any hon. Member believes that it would; and I do not believe that there is anyone in the House who does not believe that, in those circumstances, it would be the next excuse for a vast escalation of the type of violence that we have seen down the years.

I agreed with the Prime Minister when he said—or implied—that, if one breaks one of the key provisions of the Good Friday agreement, the agreement is in effect broken and finished with. If that is the case, what is the vehicle to be used to solve the problem of these beatings? What, then, is the vehicle to solve the issue of decommissioning? Let us ask ourselves that and answer ourselves truthfully—there is no vehicle left for the political process.

Of course, there will be those who say that we can solve the problem through policing. If it could have been done that way, those who are carrying out the attacks would have been behind bars long ago, and we all know that. Could it be done with new security measures? They have been tried for 30 years, and the problem has not been ended. Could it be done with new legislation? All of us should think what legislation that is not on the statute book but that might be on it would solve the problems of violence. Could it be done by political exclusion? If that is the feeling and the mood in some quarters, I warn that to exclude people from the political process is not the way to wean them from violence and arms.

Mr. Maginnis: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Mallon: I have limited time, as the hon. Gentleman knows, and I want to finish my contribution. I always give way, but not this time.

The motion presents the House with a choice: we can swap the agreement, with all its difficulties, for another political vacuum. By so doing, we acknowledge the failure of our political process and throw away the keys—the keys to our future, the keys to peace. We throw those keys inexorably into the hands of the leaders of all the paramilitary groupings. Is that we want to do? Can we do it? Can we even contemplate it?

Right at the core of the Good Friday agreement is a crucial fact that is often overlooked. The central importance of the agreement is the fact that, for the first time since partition, the people of Northern Ireland—Unionist and nationalist—agreed how they would solve constitutional, political and social issues. They agreed to solve them by peaceful means, through the political process, for the first time since partition. It took almost 80 years to get to that point. To throw that out and to throw the keys away would jeopardise any hope for the future. I cannot contemplate the House doing that, and I do not believe that it will.

I want to make one last point in relation to the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State and the Minister of State. All the issues surrounding violence in the north of Ireland are highly sensitive. We can all bleed within ourselves about them, and we can all blame everybody. I want to put on record my admiration for the courage, the compassion and the concern shown by the Secretary of State and the Minister of State, the right hon. Member for East Kilbride (Mr. Ingram). I get tired listening to them being bashed.

Those are the people at the coal face, soaking up the vitriol that comes in their direction—for doing what? For doing exactly what I agreed they should do when my party signed the agreement, and for doing what other parties asked them to do when they signed the agreement, and for standing as a bulwark between the political process and the future, and a return to the awful past that we have experienced for so long.

I want that to be put on the record, because it is grossly unfair that, when we charge the Secretary of State and her Ministers to pursue a line of policy contained in an agreement that we have reached, we start to complain and bitterly, publicly hold those people to ransom because they have carried out their commitment to that agreement.

I ask the House not to put at risk the consensus that exists, however tenuous it may be. However difficult it is, do not risk it—the risk is far too high. At risk is the future, and future generations who will have to live with it. Do not make this or any other issue a make-or-break issue for the agreement. Agreements are much more easily broken than created.

I have spent the years from Whitelaw to Mowlam in negotiations. That is only one part of one lifetime. Do we start again on another 30 years of negotiation, to try to reach the point where we are now, or do we preserve it, with everything under our control? We should never make this issue—I know that it has not been made so—a party political one. I recognise that it has not because people feel deeply about it. If we start playing with an agreement, which had to be created and took so long and so much effort from so many people to create, we are playing with fire. And that fire will be not just the awful barbarism of the beatings that have occurred, but the type of violence that we all know exists.

5.5 pm

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): I shall suggest another way of looking at the issue, detaching the political element from the criminal behaviour. I shall be interested to hear what other hon. Members think about the suggestions that I make. At the very least, I hope that I provide a different perspective.

I add my tribute to Families Against Intimidation and Terror and other organisations that try so hard to help victims of organised assaults and, on occasions, even stand up to those who perpetrate the crimes. If it were not for the likes of Vincent McKenna, who showed great courage and determination in ensuring that there are several directions in which victims can turn, the situation could be unimaginably worse than the very grave circumstances in which they find themselves at the moment.

Let us be clear that the term "punishment beatings" has been put to rest today. I certainly agree with the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) that "punishment beatings" is an inappropriate term. Perhaps we shall no longer hear it used in the Chamber. We are talking of organised assaults; simple criminal action in a criminal

[Mr. Lembit Öpik]

underworld which has no legitimacy on either political or legal grounds. In some ways, the tactics are similar to those used in the Chicago turf wars in the 1930s, when there was great commercial and political unrest among gangsters. We are talking of racketeers who seek, not just to protect a political interest, but to ensure that coercion keeps them at the top of their pile in Northern Irish life.

Let us define what is going on: intimidation, injury and, occasionally, death. Indeed, it sounds as if there has been another tragic death among the people in Northern Ireland. Such events occur in a way that we simply do not see on the mainland, where I imagine that, from time to time, there are localised incidents, but, when they occur, the police come down very hard. As the Conservatives have suggested, such things would not be tolerated on the mainland for any length of time.

It is difficult to assess the incidence of such events in Northern Ireland. The fact that figures—even the statistics quoted today by the Prime Minister and others—vary shows that, due to the intimidation wielded among those who could otherwise come forward to make statements, reliable statistics are difficult to gather. The rule of fear is so great that we cannot know exactly the extent of injuries and problems. I suspect that FAIT's statistics are pretty accurate because it speaks informally with victims, something that the police cannot always do.

Who is to blame? It is not the Government, the Good Friday agreement or the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Obviously, it is not the victims. The only people who are to blame for these terrible evils are the paramilitaries and others who commit such crimes. It is the perpetrators who should be called to account, not any other groups of people. Our role is not to attribute blame among ourselves in this Chamber, but to ask what we can do to prevent the perpetrators from carrying out their barbaric acts.

On that basis, the Conservatives' proposal is inappropriate. Making a connection between prisoner releases and beatings will not resolve the issue, as the hon. Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) pointed out.

The important distinction that I seek to make is that it is inappropriate for us to regard the large proportion of the attacks as motivated primarily by politics. They must be regarded as being motivated primarily by nothing more than criminal aspiration—an attempt to coerce a community simply by breaking the law, thereby breaking bones, destroying lives and intimidating individuals, and all that clearly pervades in large areas of Northern Ireland.

To pretend that there is a consistent and specific link between the political peace process and that criminal activity is to misunderstand the solution that we will ultimately have to implement. I draw an analogy with Estonia, a country that I know well and that also experienced enormous political upheavals, as it shifted from being a satellite state in the former Soviet Union to becoming a free and independent state liberated from the Soviet Union.

The KGB, which was primarily a political organ for the former Soviet Union, converted itself into a criminal organisation that was primarily motivated by cash interest and by maintaining the power of those near the top of the organisation. It stopped being a political organisation, but carried on many of its coercive activities in the criminal interests of those involved. There was a surge in black market activities as well.

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the criminal activity that is going on is carried out by organisations that were party to the Belfast agreement? Surely what they are doing contradicts what they professed that they would do under that agreement: give up all violence—whether they carried it out for political or other reasons—and take on the democratic process.

Mr. Öpik: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point, and I shall return to it. I am suggesting that we should look at that issue differently and that it is, in large part, up to us to define the extent to which we should regard the beatings and the intimidation as politically motivated and the extent to which we should regard them as organised crime.

I return to the KGB analogy. The KGB, which was no longer a political organisation, carried on working, as a criminal organisation, in Estonia and elsewhere. The Estonian authorities converted their approach to it into a criminal approach. As a result, they managed to reduce the criminal and coercive activities to a point at which things were much improved.

In the same way, we should seriously consider whether it is now appropriate to detach elements of the activities of those paramilitary organisations from the political process—which I hope will deliver peace—and treat those beatings simply as thuggery and crime. We may have to increase massively investment in the police services to destroy that criminal activity and, at the same time, recognise that there is a distinction in motive. There is not necessarily always a political motive, or a motive associated with the peace process, behind such activities.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving away some of his time to allow me to intervene. Although we can accept that each act may be criminal, does he not see that such acts are also part of a political programme? Paramilitaries on both sides want influence over the outcome of the Patten commission. They have a crucial role now; they are increasing the amount of violence to show that certain parts of the Province cannot be policed so that the Patten commission will suggest proposals that would break the national police force. Those activities are criminal, but they are also highly political.

Mr. Öpik: I want to move on to that issue. Although what I have described may take account of a large proportion of the activity that takes place—I sincerely believe that a lot of it is motivated by criminal, not political, interest—it is nevertheless reasonable to assume, as two hon. Members have done, that some activity is politically motivated.

We could have made the whole situation a lot simpler, if we had thought about that at the time of the Good Friday agreement. The issue was considered, but it was not specifically included in the agreement, which is why we now face problems of definition in respect of categorising beatings. In fact, I think we made a mistake; last April, we should have expressed a specific view on

the issue. Still, we could debate that until the cows come home, but we cannot rewrite the agreement. Therefore, the question is merely of historical interest rather than practical application.

We should consider the consequences of accepting that some of those activities might be politically motivated. That is the issue that the Secretary of State must address in deciding what to do about them. If the paramilitary organisations made an overt effort to proceed with their political intentions, and to move towards their stated goals, through coercive means, we would get into a grey area. There might be a case for reassessing everything, from prisoner releases to the status of the Good Friday agreement.

I do not have the same information as the Secretary of State, or as hon. Members from the Province, who are much better informed than I am, so I cannot be sure whether any such move is taking place, but my judgment is that the agreement is—at the moment, at least—maintaining a ceasefire that I can regard as intact and a peace process that is our best hope for peace for more than 30 years.

I recognise that others may have different views. Perhaps Conservative Members and other hon. Members think that the Good Friday agreement has been breached in an unacceptable fashion, but therein lies the path to great danger. The Secretary of State made the point—as did the Prime Minister at Question Time today—that implying that the Good Friday agreement has in some part failed is a much worse option.

Rather than taking that approach, and rather than the Government specifically and overtly showing that the process is failing by slowing down or stopping prisoner releases, we should handle the beatings in a different way. First, we should find a process that would make it easier for victims to come forward with information. I know that that has been said before, and I shall not suggest such a process now; I may not even be able to do so, and certainly could not do that in three minutes. It might be expensive, but we may have to invest in seeking an alternative to what people are faced with at the moment: either silence or the terror of coming forward.

Secondly, we have to accept that implementation of the correct rule of law is an expensive business in the face of racketeers and powerful paramilitary organisations. The Government should say that, whatever the cost, since human liberties are involved, the need to normalise law enforcement in Northern Ireland is so great that this is an area for legitimate additional investment in those communities.

To an extent, there is lack of faith in some of those communities that the law can protect them or even reach them. That has to be dealt with. There are areas where the RUC has a poor profile and, as a result, the mountain that we must climb to institute normal law enforcement activities is great. Nevertheless, the Secretary of State should make a specific commitment, putting this point of principle above cost.

We must consider the political element on an on-going basis. If it looks as though some of those organisations are specifically using beatings and organised assaults to try to further their political aims, we must think long and hard about whether they are breaching the Good Friday agreement. Here, I do not think that we are arguing a point of principle; we are arguing a point of judgment. The view of the right hon. Member for Bracknell is different from mine, and other hon. Members sitting behind me share a different view, but that is why it is useful for us to have a rational debate.

Where do we go from here? As I have said in the past, there are elements of brinkmanship in the process, and there may be elements of brinkmanship as we seek to turn off the tap on these beatings. We have to be courageous. Once again, the Secretary of State is in the invidious position of attempting to decide how to be tough, what is the most effective way to be tough and what investment should be made to implement a tough policy.

We must recognise that simple solutions, such as slowing or stopping prisoner releases, make a statement without necessarily taking account of the consequences. Such solutions would have the wrong consequences. It is far more difficult to detach some of those activities and put them into the criminal context, assess the others on an on-going basis in a political context, and provide the investment to make sure that both kinds of activity are controlled. But, if we took that more difficult option, I would be fairly confident that we could not only win the respect of communities, but achieve our long-term objective of normalising Northern Ireland.

No one should have to live with those beatings, but we must do nothing that would fundamentally jeopardise the peace process, which has gone a lot further than many of us expected.

5.20 pm

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): Members of the campaign Families Against Intimidation and Terror have visited the House many times since the campaign's inception in 1990, but its visit just before Christmas constituted a major breakthrough.

People in Britain find it difficult to appreciate the degree of intimidation that exists in Northern Ireland estates. That extends to many of my colleagues in the House. The campaign, however, managed to bring a good many people together during its visit, and I think that had some influence.

I agreed to table a number of early-day motions whose content was drawn from information that the campaign supplied about the beatings. The motions, which were signed by members of all political parties, expressed the genuine concern felt by all hon. Members. I went further, however, and tabled another early-day motion suggesting that there should be a link with the issue of the release of prisoners. I argued for a slowing down of their release, rather than for a complete stop, because I thought that many might interpret a complete stop as a breach of the Belfast agreement, and I wanted to avoid that. I accepted that the word "slow" could mean "very slow indeed", and could be understood in that way by the paramilitaries.

As a result of that argument, I have been the subject of favourable comments in editorials in *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Times* and *The Independent*, and have even had an honourable mention from the Leader of the Opposition during Prime Minister's Question Time. I would much prefer to receive support in the editorials of "Socialist Campaign Group News", *Tribune* and the *Morning Star*, which reflect my political stance, and I would sooner be praised by the Prime Minister. I may not agree with him about "third way" politics, but I am full

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of admiration for all that the Northern Ireland team has done, for the establishment of the agreement and for the role that the Prime Minister has played in the process.

I am trying to encourage and develop that process, and to ensure that it works. I know that the beatings and other troubles in Northern Ireland pose a massive problem, and that the release of prisoners alienates many people there. We must hold on to those people in our support for the process. The problem is probably greater in the Protestant community than in the Catholic community, because the majority in support of the agreement was smaller there. We must try to sustain the position of the Ulster Unionists who are involved in the process, whichever avenue they follow.

I thought that the debate was about the link between punishment beatings and prisoners, but some have suggested that certain people should be excluded from the Assembly. I want to avoid that. If people take on board what is said about so-called punishment beatings, it will be easier for us to advance our views.

I have always argued that we should look for ways in which the paramilitaries can be encouraged to involve themselves in what they call concessions. If the IRA would only tell us where the bodies of the disappeared are, Christian burials could take place. That would represent movement—movement that could be associated with, for instance, the ending of exile. It has been said that we do not want politicians in Northern Ireland to be exiled, but many people are exiled from Northern Ireland. They cannot return until the beatings stop; even if they are told that they can, they will not feel safe. The involvement of paramilitary groups in smuggling and protection rackets also needs to be tackled.

If we can achieve some movement in the areas that I have mentioned, the prize will be concessions in terms of decommissioning, which is the major issue. A small amount of decommissioning would be fantastic, because it would be contrary to all the IRA's traditions. When people were told to rob a bank in order to get some guns to engage in future terrorist activity, they would say "Get lost. You have given the guns away." Those are serious issues, and the concern of Families Against Intimidation and Terror is justified.

Nancy Gracey, who helped to set up the campaign, was involved with Protestant families although she was a Catholic. She had experienced similar problems to theirs. She began by looking for support. One of my proudest memories is of seeing her on television with an early-day motion of which she was obviously proud. I had tabled the motion, congratulating her on the establishment of the campaign. It has taken a long time for the campaign to reach centre stage, and to be mentioned other than in parliamentary questions and Adjournment debates. It is not alone, however: there are many other worthwhile organisations, many of which receive Government funding.

I have a problem with the Government amendment. I have no problem in voting for it, because it expresses all the right sentiments, but where does it go after that? Citrine—whom we in the Labour movement often quote—might describe it as pious. It contains no proposal or strategy for the ending of punishments. Whatever may be wrong with the Opposition motion and my suggested amendment, at least they involve some sort of strategy, albeit perhaps inappropriate or weak.

We all support what has been done by the Northern Ireland Office, and the recent discussions with the leaders of the three political parties in the Assembly. They have laid it on the line. However, we want solid progress: we want all the stops to be pulled out. People in Northern Ireland need that more than anyone else. They need to be drawn into the process.

Although the Opposition are allowing us to have a good debate, I do not know what their motion means or why it is there. I fear that it is there because some Opposition Members have threatened to name names in the House, and have pressurised their party into adopting a stronger position. The Conservative leadership has come up with this motion in the hope that such matters will be dropped.

Some Conservatives supported the "No" campaign, and want the agreement to be wrecked. I entirely oppose that position, and oppose Northern Ireland Members who support it, although I agree with them about other matters of a social and economic nature.

Mr. MacKay: Let me put the record straight. The overwhelming majority of Conservative Members fully support the Belfast agreement and the process, as I have clearly outlined. Only a handful do not. There is one simple reason why we tabled the motion, and I think that it has been proved to be worth while from the high standard of the debate: to draw attention to the dreadful plight of those innocent people who are victims of terrorism of the worse sort. I can put the hon. Gentleman's mind at rest.

Mr. Barnes: I am pleased to hear that. I have a suggestion in connection with that: when we get to 7 o'clock, the Opposition should not press their motion because we will have had the debate. They might say, "We have not quite found exactly the deal that gets the paramilitaries to do these things. We are applying our mind to it. We are arguing with the Government about it. We will listen to their responses and we are encouraging a certain development to take place."

I tried with an amendment; obviously, it was not going to be selected. I hoped that the Conservative party might have backed it. I am in no sense jumping on any Conservative bandwagon. In fact, I had a little bandwagon going for about 10 years, although it mainly reflected what Families Against Intimidation and Terror was doing. The Conservative party should come on board in terms of my amendment.

Within politics, there is politicking. Perhaps some members of the Conservative party feel that it would not be all that much of a loss if the process fails because it would do so under a Labour Government, rather than a future Conservative Government. I still want to say many honourable things about certain people in the Conservative party.

Mr. MacKay: We passionately want the agreement and the process to work, but let me explain why, although superficially attracted to the hon. Gentleman's amendment, I feel that there is a problem with it. His proposal would be illegal, as I think the Minister will explain in his winding-up speech. There is only one of

two options. We either do not decertify the various parties, so prisoner releases can continue, or we do. We cannot slow the process down. It is not an option, even though the House might like to have it. It is not possible under the law.

Mr. Barnes: I picked up that there was a problem. Some people seemed to say at first that halting early release, the Opposition's position, was legally possible and that there were problems with slowing it down, as my amendment proposes. However, "slow down" was introduced to try to get around the problem of people saying that halting early release would violate the agreement. Therefore, we can look for something else, but I still think that it would be a great advantage if the Opposition did not press their motion when we come to the end of the debate.

I agree that there are many genuine Conservatives who support the process and who were there at its birth. At the moment, I should be in a meeting of the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs, which is discussing exactly the type of economic and social affairs in which we should be engaged in.

The Chairman is the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke). I know that he is solidly behind the process because he produced the form of words initially that started the whole process going, so those elements are there. Let us have the debate, but not then go further by pressing for a Division. We are looking for matters of substance to try to solve these particular problems.

From a left-socialist position, I always believed that something like the agreement should be established. In the Labour party, we used to have a policy of a united Ireland by consent. It was an inconsistent policy because we could not have a united Ireland by consent; a united Ireland could happen only without consent. It was much more sensible when we developed a position where the parties could be facilitated to come together to agreement.

We nudged the parties on occasions. Headings of agreement were drawn up on what they had said. The two Governments got together to move in that direction, but it always seemed that that was the right sort of thing to do. I have great disagreements with many people who go for centralist politics in relation to economic and social matters—I disagree even with the Prime Minister in connection with those—but when it came to Northern Ireland's constitution or political matters, there was an obvious area for an almost artificial centre.

We have got that going and we have to keep it going, but, at the same time, we have to do things to protect people in communities from being beaten, battered and all the other problems that are associated with that. We should act in ways that assist them to get out of those problems.

I appeal to certain of my colleagues who are very much on the left: if they have any links with Sinn Fein, they should put the strongest pressure that they can possibly on it. We should not be ambivalent in any way about violence or the new violence that is happening now in terms of the beatings, their spread and the fact that there is a political strategy behind them—as well as all the other considerations. It is fully understood that parties are organising to further their own ends in connection with the beatings. We should not have it.

Therefore, we have to look for methods, more police expenditure and improvements, and ask where the peace dividend is going to be spent; there is no peace dividend if we look at the statistics. Those things should be used to create a situation in which we achieve what everyone wants to be achieved.

5.37 pm

Mr. Michael Mates (East Hampshire): The hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) always makes an idiosyncratic and amusing speech. I hope that his political credentials have not been utterly ruined by praise from both *The Daily Telegraph* and my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), the Leader of the Opposition, on the same day.

I support wholeheartedly the bipartisan approach and the Good Friday agreement. I think that everyone knows that; I know that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland knows it. However, that does not mean—it is rather offensive to be told this by some Labour Members—that we cannot and must not criticise.

The definitive remark came from the Secretary of State herself. She may remember that, when we appeared on "Question Time" some years ago, when our roles were reversed, I defended a particularly controversial thing that my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) had just said. She tore into me, and told me that I was talking rubbish and defending the indefensible, whereupon Mr. Dimbleby said, "But I thought you had a bipartisan process." "Of course we do," she said, "but that does not mean that we cannot criticise the Government when they are wrong." That is what we are doing. There is no discredit in that. I am sure that she will agree.

I hope that the Secretary of State will agree too that, apart from the small print in the Good Friday agreement and all the other bits of legislation that we have had, the words of reassurance that have been spoken by leaders are also important. In the summer, when the releases started—when the process started—there was much concern that the IRA had not moved an inch. To reassure those people who were worried about the process being one-sided, the Prime Minister said clearly and unequivocally, "I shall insist on parallel movement through all stages of the agreement."

In all honesty, that remark should be withdrawn. There has been no parallel movement. One side has been totally stationary, while the other side—the Government—have pressed ahead, honouring the letter and spirit of the agreement. I do not criticise that, but there must come a time when the Prime Minister has to say either, "I do not insist on parallel movement any longer," or "There is none and I am going to stop moving until someone catches up."

It is an illogical statement to have made as it simply has not been applied by the IRA in any way, shape or form. It is not particularly honest for that remark still to be on the record if the time of it has passed.

I come to another remark, which was made by the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble), the leader of the Ulster Unionist party, to which I noticed the Secretary of State shake her head. He asked what the Prime Minister was doing saying that, if prisoner releases stopped, that would be the end of the Good Friday agreement. He said that last week and I thought that he said it again this week.

[Mr. Michael Mates]

Last week my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition said:

"Is it not time that we put on hold the release of convicted terrorists, when they have not yet given up a single gun or bomb?"

The Prime Minister answered by saying:

"The right hon. Gentleman is, in effect, asking us to bring the whole Good Friday agreement to an end."—[*Official Report*, 20 January 1999; Vol. 323, c. 901-902.]

That is at the heart of the matter. It would bring the Good Friday agreement to an end. That is what Mr. Adams and Mr. McGuinness have threatened. They have said that if there is a slowdown or deviation in anything that the Government do, the whole thing is off. They are proceeding by implied threat while doing absolutely nothing. They are trying to bring the blame for any breakdown upon the Government and not themselves.

Nobody has yet called their bluff. The Secretary of State was, uncharacteristically, wringing her hands on the radio this morning when she said, "I could not do anything about it even if I wanted to." That is a counsel of despair. She will run out of options if she continues with this line. All the prisoners will be out and not one bullet, one bomb or one gun will have been handed in. What will she do then? Will she say, "Isn't it dreadful. They have not done anything. We have another year under the agreement and we will press on"? If that happens, the beatings will continue, as will the punishment and the violence, which has not decreased. The right hon. Lady will have lost what I see as her only card in restraining them and calling their bluff. That is why my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition has tabled the motion. We have had a useful debate.

Mr. Robert McCartney *rose—*

Mr. Mates: I hope that the hon. and learned Gentleman will forgive me if I do not give way. I have only a short time and I have another point to make.

We now have a situation in which the Government are proceeding with the agreement in letter and spirit, and the IRA are not proceeding with the agreement in either letter or spirit. Even worse, there are implied threats day after day, week after week, that they will not be told when they have to move in the direction in which the Prime Minister has insisted and on which the spirit of the Good Friday agreement is based.

The crunch will really come over decommissioning. The Secretary of State continues to say that it has to happen because it is in the agreement. The IRA and Sinn Fein continue to say—I believe them—that it will not happen under any circumstances. At the start of this process, Mr. McGuinness said that there would be, "Not one bullet." Mr. Adams keeps saying that the, "IRA is still there." The Ard Fheis held by the IRA general council or army council—whatever it is called—said that the IRA would not give up its arms or surrender its weapons under any circumstances.

Why are we in any doubt that the IRA means that? Why do we keep saying, "It is in the agreement so it will have to happen"? The leaders of the IRA are not in a position—I doubt they would be willing anyway—to force the IRA to hand over their weapons. They do not want to do it because of their attitude of no surrender, which is always in the thoughts of the IRA. It will not happen.

What will happen when the time comes, according to the agreement, for the setting up of the Executive? Will the right hon. Member for Upper Bann have to go back on his declared intention not to sit down with those people until they have made a move in that direction? I do not believe that that is a tolerable position for him. I do not think that his party or his people would let him do it and I would think less of him if he did. That is the position that has been taken not just by the leadership in this place, but by all right-thinking people and all the people in Northern Ireland who voted for the agreement. They voted for both parties to move out of the impasse in which they have found themselves.

We have had no movement whatsoever. If the Government do not take some action to call that bluff, the right hon. Lady will probably say, "It is not down to me. I am afraid it is down to the Ulster Unionists." That is what the IRA is already saying. It is saying that it is the intransigence of the Ulster Unionists that is causing the problems in the setting up of the Executive.

I know that the Secretary of State takes her responsibilities seriously. She must not just sit back, wring her hands and say that she cannot do anything about it. The crunch will come on 10 March. Perhaps we can delay that, but we cannot delay it indefinitely because the day will not come when the IRA will decommission its weapons. It has said that clearly and unequivocally.

Such cards as the Government had in what was a skilful and difficult series of negotiations are being dropped one by one. The right hon. Lady needs to take note of the genuine concerns that have been raised on both sides of the Chamber. The time is running out. She must not go on pandering to the IRA—I do not use that word lightly—allowing the wives of IRA killers to come in and see Ministers and providing more money for the resettlement of prisoners than for the victims of crimes.

I know what the right hon. Lady is doing. She is trying to persuade them that our cause—hers and mine—is genuine. It is genuine, but it needed some persuading at the beginning. With respect, I suggest to the Secretary of State that the boot is now on the other foot. She must start persuading decent Unionists that her determination to make the terrorist organisations honour the agreement is just as strong as her determination to honour it herself. If she does not do that, I fear that what set out to be an exciting adventure may end in tears.

5.46 pm

Mr. Eddie McGrady (South Down): I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to participate in the debate. I shall be brief, so that other hon. Members can contribute. The right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) moved the motion in an eloquent and emotive way. He described graphically the trauma, torture and torment suffered by individuals and families. He gave us a litany of data about the terrorist offences visited on those people and on the communities.

At every Northern Ireland debate in the House since last Easter, whether it was on the Northern Ireland Bill, the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Bill or any other opportunity, I have tried to make the point consistently that the communities in Northern Ireland, even those that

are totally opposed to violence, have endured and suffered violence for over a generation—30 years. I have urged the House to consider the fact that it would not be possible by any agreement to switch off immediately the use of violence for political and personal purposes because such violence is endemic in certain parts of our community. That does not mean that we excuse or condone it. There is not a single person in the House, the country or Ireland who, in civilised terms, would condone or excuse any act of violence that has taken place.

Those of us who live in those communities can see a complex pattern of what is happening. Many of the beatings are rooted purely in criminality. That does not mean that they are different or that people suffer any less. Many of the beatings involve people mixed up in the drugs racket, the protection racket or in territorial claims. Some of them are personal vendettas, many of which can be superficial. It may be that the godfather's car has been damaged and he sends out the thugs and hoods to teach someone a lesson.

That is what much, although not all, of this is about. The sinister fact to which I want to draw the House's attention is that that is the habitual criminality that our society has to address from now on. We must show that we are determined to work together. We must show leadership in delivering a civilised society based on good social and economic order if we are to cut that cancerous growth out of our society once and for all. Basically, that is what the agreement is about. It is about living together for the betterment of our communities.

I have no evidence, but I suggest that there may be another agenda. Paramilitary influences in Northern Ireland are very complex. I am convinced that some of the beatings and killings are aimed at discrediting those elements of the paramilitary organisations and their political representatives who are in favour of a continuing ceasefire, even if they cannot yet deliver all that is required of them. There are certainly elements in the IRA, the Ulster Volunteer Force or the Ulster Defence Association—we can give them any name that we like; I could name 10 or more paramilitary organisations that most people have not heard of—that are committing acts of violence. Their purpose is to drive us towards doing what the motion asks.

The right hon. Member for Bracknell referred eloquently to the tragic event this morning involving Eamon Collins just outside my constituency. My information is that he was killed in a hit and run accident. That may be true, but assessing the situation without evidence risks inflaming the situation. Some of those involved in paramilitary beatings and killings are trying to drive the agreement on to the rocks.

People knew that we were going to have this debate but, far from there being a reduction in such incidents, they have escalated. That may be a coincidence, but I doubt it. The purpose is to drive us towards the decision that the motion calls for.

Let us consider the practicality of stopping the release of prisoners. The Secretary of State can do that, given the proper evidence. So what? It would not have much effect on paramilitaries' attempts to control communities by beatings, maimings and killings. We have to address that in a more difficult, more complex and, unfortunately, longer-term way. That requires strong local government by local people.

There is a political agenda. Almost the entire speech of the hon. Member for East Hampshire (Mr. Mates) was a political contribution. It was about not the criminality of what is happening, but the political drive behind it. He put decommissioning in an interesting context. The debate process is part of the decommissioning debate. The parties in Northern Ireland who support the Good Friday agreement and the 18 December agreement, on the bodies to be established, are within 20 days—I hope; the relevant date should be 15 February—of signing up to that. Decommissioning has been put up as an obstacle to that. I shall not argue the pros and cons of that debate today. I want total decommissioning, but I also want the complete dismantling of all paramilitary organisations for ever. It does not concern me that a gun is buried in a pit somewhere if no one goes to that pit and gets the gun to use it against someone in my community. As I said in an earlier debate, we could put a gun on the Table in the Chamber and come back in 1,000 years, during which it would have done no harm if the human element had not touched it. We must be careful not to exclude that possibility.

We are 20 days away, in my hopeful opinion, from a major breakthrough. There is a difficult balance to strike between those elements of the paramilitaries that are trying to destroy the agreement, which has been carefully nurtured and brought to this point, and other elements that are trying to sustain a ceasefire and keep the process going with their political representatives.

That is a judgment. I have no hard evidence on who is in one camp and who is in the other. It is just an observation and an interpretation of what is happening around me in my community. Today's debate is not dangerous, but it would be dangerous for the motion to be passed or used as ammunition by the paramilitary opponents of the agreement to disrupt the process further. The exclusion of some members who were elected to the Assembly from participating in the democratic process would be equally dangerous. Whether we like them or dislike them is irrelevant; they have been voted in under the terms of the law that was passed by the House. There are many people whose history I know and do not like, but I have to work with them. That is the price that we have to pay for peace in Northern Ireland. I am prepared to work with them on the understanding that there has been at least an element of conversion that has given us a prospect of establishing an enduring peace in our community. I am a middle-aged man and I have not known enduring peace in my lifetime. We are aiming at a prize beyond compare.

We should not give ammunition to those who are trying to destroy the agreement by violence or by putting up obstacles in the political process to prevent us from coming to the conclusion that I hope for on 15 February. The right hon. Member for Bracknell said that the purpose of the debate was to draw attention to an evil cancer in our society. That is right and proper, and I have no problem with it; but if he is just drawing attention to the issue, he cannot follow that by asking the Government to stop prisoner releases, because that would immediately give the paramilitaries who oppose the agreement an excuse to take a dominant position and re-establish violence in our society. I sincerely hope that the motion will be withdrawn.

5.58 pm

Rev. Ian Paisley (North Antrim): The events since the Omagh bombing and the increase in paramilitary attacks have shown how Governments react to such atrocities. First there is a general outcry, in which everyone joins, and solemn pledges are made by political leaders that the perpetrators will be hunted down ruthlessly. In the case of Omagh, our Prime Minister and Mr. Ahern responded with so-called draconian legislation, even suggesting that suspected bombers would be gaoled—on the word of a senior police officer alone, if necessary. We have had the Prime Minister's word and it is not enough. We have seen the special powers and they are useless. Those who carried out the Omagh atrocity walk free.

You will remember the recall of Parliament, Mr. Deputy Speaker. You will remember the strong words that were spoken and the fact that, in Dail Eireann, the new offence of directing terrorism was introduced, with a maximum penalty of life imprisonment. When the threat died down and the survivors' suffering no longer reached the front pages, the condemnatory words evaporated, and little has changed.

The laws that were to have the terrorists quaking in their boots have failed. They are laughing. Suspects flout the new laws, which are either ineffective or unused. Paramilitaries are getting out of gaol and some of them are very much behind what is going on. In January, we heard that some of the prisoners released had been charged with new offences.

The Belfast agreement, which brought about their release, promised that the gun would be taken out of Irish politics and that the gunmen would be banished. That has not happened. The Prime Minister acknowledged today that it was not a perfect peace, yet we were told that it would be.

Many other released prisoners are suspected of involvement in the wave of attacks, including arson and intimidation, that has beset Northern Ireland. We have heard a catalogue of what is taking place. In my constituency, a move is afoot to put the gangsterism out of control and demoralise the police. I think that it was the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) who said that the RUC was being hit and that pressure on the Constabulary was encouraging the commission to move.

Some think that the wild men, as they are called, have suddenly come into being; but the wild men of the Republican movement, and of other movements, have not suddenly come into being. They are there today because of the failure of Governments to deal with terrorism and to put it down.

Some of us will remember that, 23 years ago, there was a massacre in Kingsmills. It sparked off one of the greatest revulsions against terrorism that I have seen in the Province. Ten Protestants were gunned down in cold blood when the bus in which they were travelling was stopped by an armed gang. An 11th Protestant, Alan Black, survived, but was maimed for life. The only Roman Catholic on board escaped with his life after the killers told him to flee.

At that time, we were told that steps would be taken to bring those responsible for the atrocity to trial. If the Government of that day had done their duty and gone after those men ruthlessly, we would not be reaping other atrocities, and perhaps we would not even have had the sorrow of Omagh. There are hard men in the republican movement who can fly flags of convenience whenever they like. I believe that the IRA leadership condones their actions, and allows them to return to the ranks after a time. There are all sorts of flags of convenience.

It is interesting to note that a police dossier carefully prepared on the Kingsmills massacre has recently come to light. It shows that the police did thorough work, had definite evidence and could, if they had been encouraged, have got men into the courts; but that did not happen. Now we are told by the police officer investigating the Omagh atrocity that he knows the identity of the bombers but he cannot secure a conviction.

The Tullyvallen massacre, another terrible atrocity, was thought to be the work of some group calling itself the South Armagh Republican Action Group; but that, too, was undoubtedly a cover name for a gang of cross-border PIRA terrorists. The fact must be faced that, under the surface, there are those who are ready to act, whose actions will be condoned and who will probably be reincorporated into the republican movement after they have acted.

There is something seriously wrong with any country—and any Government—that permits known killers to walk the streets with impunity while their victims lie in cold graves. The fact that the killers could operate both inside and outside the IRA name, according to political circumstance, is no comfort to the community. It is an indictment of the Government's and the legal system's failure to address the problem.

The documents that I have mentioned reveal that top PIRA players are free to operate as PIRA, or under any other name during times of ceasefire, in the knowledge that they will be accepted back into the PIRA fold when they are required. The futility of those who believe that the IRA ceasefire is foundation enough on which to build the peace process stands exposed.

According to the dossier, Eugene Reavey, a well-known republican,

"set up the Kingsmills massacre"

and transported Malachy McParland to the site. It says that Brendan Ferris of Drumcraw was seen to be diverting traffic away from the Kingsmills crossroads before the tragedy took place. It says:

"Ferris is sourced as being seen in the area of the massacre shortly before it took place."

The dossier says:

"The same terrorists are involved in these incidents"

under a cover name for a gang of cross-border PIRA terrorists. It says that some of those people are

"implicated in the Drummacravall shooting, the murder of CPL. Frazer, and possibly the murder of McNeice and Gibson."

It refers to Michael Thomas Brannigan,

"formerly of McKinley Park Tullyvallen. He has been reported several times for his involvement in explosions and shootings."

The dossier says that on 31 December 1975,

"at Road House",

near Jonesborough,

"14 PIRA men were holding a meeting—Michael McKevitt, Tony Magill, Brian Smith and 11 others were there."

Those are well-known PIRA men. It says that the Kingsmills ambush was

"carried out by some of the top PIRA . . . Brian Smith, Arnold White, Brian Hearty, Michael Brannigan, Tony Magill."

All that information is authenticated in the police document, which also names T. G. McVerry, Joe McSharry, Michael O'Hare, Jim Feehan, the Markey brothers, Peter McCann and the Loughran brothers as having good knowledge of what took place on that dreadful day.

The dossier says that Aiden McKeown of Whitecross and F. McIlhaw of Camlough were there as witnesses and that a blue van containing the PIRA terrorists was driven by Michael Coburn of Blackwatertown as part of the ambush and that another Ford Cortina was driven by F. Cullen. All those facts were set out, yet nothing was done, and the men walk free.

The problem with the Government's strategy is that only a knave and a fool would believe that a few places in government handed to Sinn Fein-IRA will secure for us a long-term peace. It will do nothing of the kind. To put Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness into government is not the way to get peace. It is a way to give them even greater force to carry out their objective—to destroy Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom.

Sooner or later, the IRA-Sinn Fein movement will want its appetite thoroughly quenched by further concessions. None of this will secure peace, stability or reconciliation. There is no prospect whatever of securing the disarmament of weapons, or the break-up of the paramilitaries.

Theodore Roosevelt said in one of his addresses:

"Peace is normally a great good and normally it coincides with righteousness. But it is righteousness and not peace which should bind the conscience of any nation as it should bind the conscience of an individual. Neither a nation or an individual can surrender conscience to another's keeping."

In Northern Ireland today, we are in danger of being victims of surrendering righteousness, justice and truth to a process that only promises a peace that it will fail to deliver, as it has failed up to this date.

6.11 pm

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): I rise to speak as a Member of this House, a member of the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee and a supporter of, and campaigner for, the Good Friday agreement. It is a shame that the modernisation process of this House has not advanced sufficiently to allow us to have time to debate on the Floor of the House some of the excellent reports that are produced by all Select Committees. I look forward to that day.

If hon. Members were to read the report on the RUC by the Select Committee, under the chairmanship of the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), they would have a better understanding of the linkage between the policing problems in a acutely divided society—or perhaps more accurately, in sections of an acutely divided society—and what is euphemistically called summary justice. I prefer to call it criminal assault, as would all hon. Members.

Just so that there is no misunderstanding, I want to state clearly that I carry no flag for either republicanism or unionism. I am a socialist—we are still allowed to be socialists in the Labour party—and my comrades and I often take a cynical view of politicians who wrap themselves in national flags. It is often a substitute for coherent political analysis and argument. As the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) pointed out, the poor bloody infantry are often sold down the river when flags become a substitute for political analysis.

One cannot ignore the constitutional question, but I long for the day when, in Northern Ireland—and perhaps throughout the island of Ireland—we can discuss politics that transcend the constitutional questions. I hope that we can talk about schools, hospitals and jobs—the bread and butter of politics. I hope that we can discuss the tension between left and right, and arguments in favour of individualism or collectivism. I long for a kind of politics that defines people by what they are and by what they believe in, rather than by what they are not.

The Good Friday agreement has given us the best opportunity of securing peace in Northern Ireland for 30 years or more. It involved taking risks and courageous decisions by Members of all parties, in this Chamber and over the water. We are talking about the establishment of an equality commission, cross-border bodies, the Assembly and a policing commission. There are also vexed questions, such as decommissioning and prisoner releases. The agreement is the best hope that we have, and it received overwhelming public endorsement from 72 per cent. of the people in Northern Ireland.

Now is not a time for backsliding. If the British Government cannot deliver their obligations within the agreement, who can? What alternative is there to the Good Friday agreement? History shows us that, when politics and politicians fail—we in this place have often failed the island of Ireland—violence fills the space, and with political violence comes gangsterism. All those aspects bear the hallmark of a dysfunctional society, but only in elements of the north of Ireland. I will return to that point later.

The right hon. Member for Bracknell was right to say that, in Twinbrook, Poleglass, Tiger's Bay or Rathcoole, we are not dealing with the politics of Stow-on-the-Wold or Chipping Norton. An English village green mentality will not do: we must lift our eyes higher. Paramilitary assaults and gangsterism can flourish only when there is a breakdown in the fabric of society—whether engineered or otherwise.

I commend the report on the RUC to the House. It is a valuable contribution towards resolving the problems of policing in Northern Ireland and the problems of no-go areas for the RUC that create the conditions which allow the thugs to operate. It is a matter of deep regret that there is less than wholehearted support for the RUC in many of the working class and inner-city areas of Londonderry-Derry or Belfast, and that is particularly prevalent among the nationalist communities.

The point is acknowledged in the Good Friday agreement—the vast majority signed up to it—which states:

"The participants recognise that policing is a central issue in any society . . . They believe that the agreement provides the opportunity for a new beginning to policing in Northern Ireland with a police service capable of attracting and sustaining support from the community as a whole . . . They consider that this opportunity should inform and underpin the development of a police service representative in terms of the make-up of the community as a whole.

An independent Commission will be established to make recommendations for future policing arrangements in Northern Ireland including means of encouraging widespread community support".

[Mr. Martin Salter]

The Select Committee report highlighted the deep imbalance in the composition of the RUC, with 93 per cent. from the Protestant tradition and only 7 per cent. from the Catholic tradition. The report concluded that there were many reasons for that, including deliberate intimidation of members of the Catholic community who wished to join the Northern Ireland police service or the RUC. An RUC survey, which was appended as evidence, said that 63 per cent. of Roman Catholics

"have been subjected to religious/political harassment within the RUC during their career . . . These levels could be higher as others who had experienced harassment did not reply".

The point I am making is that we cannot discuss the issue of criminal or paramilitary assaults in isolation.

Mr. Robathan: From his vast experience of Northern Ireland and the RUC, could the hon. Gentleman enlighten the House as to what proportion of RUC officers were from the Catholic or nationalist community in 1969, and what proportion of the Ulster Defence Regiment, when it was first established, was Catholic? Why have all those people fallen by the wayside?

Mr. Salter: If the hon. Gentleman cares to read the Select Committee reports, he will find some facts in them. There has been a significant decline in the proportion who consider the RUC representative of the whole community. However, the figures have started to rise since the ceasefire, and we should welcome that.

As much as we may wish to, we cannot discuss the appalling brutality of the paramilitaries and the gangsters in a vacuum. There is an essential connection between the issues that form the building blocks of the Good Friday agreement. Like other hon. Members, I have spoken with victims of assaults, and friends of mine in parts of Belfast who dare to call themselves socialists. I remember well a taxi ride to the airport from a conference during which the driver confided in me that he had been hijacked no fewer than 16 times. His young son had been disabled for daring to do something many teenagers should not do, but do anyway: he experimented with cannabis. That is not summary justice: it is brutality.

Some assaults are political, but there is a flourishing culture of gangsterism. The Select Committee has received evidence of oil smuggling, and of paramilitary involvement in it. Corporal Gary Fenton, a constituent of mine, was the last British soldier to lose his life in Northern Ireland, and that happened when he was challenging smuggling. Crossmaglen has become the oil capital of Northern Ireland; it even rivals Dallas. There is clearly paramilitary involvement in smuggling, and we have received information suggesting that republican paramilitaries may be involved in smuggling, while loyalist paramilitaries are involved in distribution. Again, we can see the clear connection between paramilitary activity and gangsterism.

The Good Friday agreement provides the building blocks on which our hopes for a just and peaceful society in Northern Ireland rest. We cannot cherry-pick the issues that will command tomorrow's headlines. The Opposition could choose many other issues to use as sticks with which to beat the Government, but they are aiming at the wrong target. In attacking the Government tonight, they are not attacking the thugs. In many ways, they are helping to undermine confidence in the Good Friday agreement.

We have had a useful and wide-ranging debate. Is there really a need to push the matter to a Division?

6.22 pm

Mr. Jeffrey Donaldson (Lagan Valley): The debate has touched on the reasons why it is important for people to honour the obligations placed on them. The Belfast agreement says clearly, on prisoner releases, that:

"Prisoners affiliated to organisations which have not established or are not maintaining a complete and unequivocal ceasefire will not benefit from the arrangements"

for early release.

What is meant by "complete and unequivocal ceasefire"? For a definition, we can turn to the words of the Prime Minister at Balmoral in Northern Ireland during the referendum campaign. On 14 May 1998, he said:

"In clarifying whether the terms and spirit of the agreement are being met and whether violence has genuinely been given up for good, there are a range of factors to take into account: first and foremost, a clear and unequivocal commitment that there is an end to violence for good . . . that, again as the agreement expressly states, the ceasefires are indeed complete and unequivocal".

The Prime Minister goes on to clarify what he means by "complete and unequivocal", by saying:

"An end to bombings, killings and beatings, claimed or unclaimed".

It is clear from the words of the Prime Minister that beatings and killings represent breaches of ceasefires. In his view, ceasefires that are complete and unequivocal require an end to such paramilitary activities.

The Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary has said that all the organisations benefiting from prisoner release have been engaged in such activities. Those organisations are, therefore, in breach of complete and unequivocal ceasefire. What did the Prime Minister say when he wrote his pledges to the people of Northern Ireland up on the wall during the referendum? On the prisoner issue, he wrote:

"Prisoners kept in unless violence is given up for good."

Those are the Prime Minister's words, in his own handwriting.

The decent people of Northern Ireland are bewildered by the Government's recent actions. The Government say that they will not slow down or halt the release of prisoners in spite of continuing violence. The people of Northern Ireland are saying that the Prime Minister has broken his pledge, and that the Secretary of State is not fulfilling her responsibility to ensure that ceasefires are complete and unequivocal.

If the ceasefires do not meet the Prime Minister's own definition of "complete and unequivocal", the Secretary of State has the responsibility, placed on her by the House in the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998, to review the release of paramilitary prisoners. Yet she says that releases will continue, implying that, if she halted that release, the paramilitaries would go back to full-scale terrorist violence. In other words, she is being held to ransom by the paramilitary organisations. That is the only conclusion that I and others in Northern Ireland can draw.

Clearly, terrorist organisations have been engaged in violence. The *Belfast Telegraph* of 24 July, just a few weeks after the Belfast agreement was signed, ran the

headline: "IRA linked to murder". We are talking not only of beatings and shootings, but of murder. Who is to know that the latest murder—that of Mr. Eamon Collins, which appears to have taken place in South Armagh, although we do not yet have the full report—did not have some republican involvement? Many will conclude that there was such an involvement.

What response do we expect from the Government? Is it their policy now to see no evil and hear no evil? Is that their policy on the interpretation of whether there are a complete and unequivocal ceasefires? Did the Prime Minister's word mean anything in the commitments that he gave to the people of Northern Ireland?

Mr. Maginnis: In addition to the clear indication that the IRA is involved, is there any evidence that Sinn Fein is involved? I refer to people such as Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams. On 1 June, did not the Secretary of State say that she had already said that Sinn Fein and the IRA were inextricably linked? What are the repercussions of that statement for the subject that we are considering?

Mr. Donaldson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Prime Minister has several times said at the Dispatch Box, as he did at Balmoral, that, in his opinion, the IRA and Sinn Finn are "inextricably linked". They are two parts of one organisation. Sinn Fein, when considered against the context of continuing IRA violence, is in breach of its obligations.

Sinn Fein signed up to the Mitchell principles when it entered the talks process. On punishment beatings and killings, those principles include:

"To urge that 'punishment' killings and beatings stop and to take effective steps to prevent such actions."

When the Secretary of State met the leaders of Sinn Fein-IRA, and the Progressive Unionist party and the Ulster Democratic party earlier this week, what answer did they give if she asked them what effective steps they were taking to prevent such actions? In the view of the people who live in the areas where the beatings are taking place—some of them in my constituency—no action is being seen to occur. People hear pious comments from some leaders, but they see no action being taken to prevent the beatings. Clearly, Sinn Fein-IRA and those other parties are failing in their obligations and are in breach of the Mitchell principles.

The release of prisoners is at the heart of the motion. In Northern Ireland, deep concern is felt about the ongoing releases, especially against the backdrop of on-going violence. As the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) said in his opening remarks, legislation enacted by this House places an obligation on the Secretary of State to review the situation and to consider whether the organisations that benefit from prisoner releases are engaged in complete and unequivocal ceasefires and have ceased to be involved in any act of violence. The Chief Constable of the RUC has said that they are involved in such acts, yet the right hon. Lady refuses to review, slow down or halt the release of terrorist prisoners. Unfortunately, that is because the threat of violence is holding back the Government from acting in the democratic interests of the people of Northern Ireland.

The people voted for the agreement by a majority, but they voted for an end to violence. That is not happening and it is the Government's responsibility to ensure that it does. If not, they must hold the terrorists to account. Let there be no more appeasement. We want the Government to take a firm line against the terrorist organisations and to halt the release of prisoners—whether they are loyalists or republicans does not matter, because both sides are engaged in the violence. Opposition Members condemn the violence unequivocally wherever it emanates from. The Government must bring the consequences to bear on all those organisations.

6.32 pm

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): This has been an important debate for several reasons. First, it is the first time in a long time that the needs, requirements and fears of the people of Northern Ireland, who are on the receiving end of those terrible atrocities, have been expressed and debated in the House. Secondly, it has given the Opposition the opportunity to challenge the Government—rightly, as the Prime Minister agreed at Question Time—on their judgment in this critical situation.

The paramilitaries and their political representatives seem to have a twofold agenda. First, they want to control the estates in Northern Ireland, particularly those in Belfast, so that criminal activity can take place without any police intervention and the racketeering, extortion, drugs peddling and intimidation of those who do not fall into line with those peddling such views can continue. The hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) put forward that view and asked the Government to differentiate between those and political activities, which is impossible because the same people are perpetrating both the political activities and the acts of terrorism in the estates of Northern Ireland.

As the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) pointed out in an intervention, the second part of the agenda is to undermine the Royal Ulster Constabulary by influencing, or trying to influence, the Patten commission on that body. The line will be taken that the RUC is not working on the estates—witness the beatings, shootings and atrocities—and therefore a new police structure is needed. Sinn Fein-IRA and some of the loyalist groups will then propose community policing and we all know who will undertake that—the same paramilitaries who are running the show on the estates at present.

The hon. Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady) had an interesting theory that elements within the paramilitary groups who commit the violence, do so for personal motives or as a lever against their leaders to bring them into line, so that they do not make too many concessions. If that is so, why did all those activities stop—on both sides of the sectarian divide—when President Clinton last visited Northern Ireland? In *Police Review* the Chief Constable of the RUC confirmed:

"these organisations have demonstrated an ability to bring such activity to an end when it has suited their purpose".

Several hon. Members implied that our motion was calculated, at best to destabilise and, at worst, to wreck the peace process and the agreement. I assure the House that we want implementation of the agreement in full and that includes a commitment to meaningful decommissioning, an ending of violence and an acceptance of peaceful, law abiding and democratic means to achieve political progress in Northern Ireland.

[Mr. Malcolm Moss]

On 6 May 1998, the Prime Minister said:

"It is essential that organisations that want to benefit from the early release of prisoners should give up violence."—[*Official Report*, 6 May 1998; Vol. 311, c. 711.]

On 14 May 1998, at Balmoral in Belfast, he said that there had to be

"an end to bombings, killings and beatings".

Will the Minister tell us whether the Government interpret the ceasefire simply to mean the absence of bombings, rather than including the killings and beatings, which can continue unabated? I do not think for a moment that the voters in Northern Ireland believe that. The people who gave their assent in the referendum certainly did not.

The agreement requires concessions from both sides. From the paramilitary groups, it requires decommissioning and an end to violence. In return, they obtain prisoner releases. If there is no movement on decommissioning or prisoner release, it is likely that all paramilitary prisoners will have been released with no concessions in return. That is unacceptable to Opposition Members, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Mr. Mates) pointed out so forcefully.

The Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998 gives the Secretary of State the power to suspend the prisoner release scheme or to review it. The Prime Minister confirmed that today at Prime Minister's questions, although the right hon. Lady seemed uncertain about it in her interview on the "Today" programme earlier. According to that legislation, she could specify organisations and remove their prisoners from the scheme. Once all the prisoners have been released, the right hon. Lady will have no further negotiating power. She said that she had to decide whether or not there had been a cessation of violence—despite the many sources of security advice—by making a judgment. Again, I shall quote the Chief Constable, who said in a BBC interview:

"there is no doubt whatever that all of these organisations"—

referring to the IRA, the Ulster Volunteer Force, the Ulster Defence Association and the Ulster Freedom Fighters—

"including those who purport to be in cessation of military operations, are engaged in this repugnant activity".

The Secretary of State confirmed this evening that she can use her discretion under the 1998 Act. She also confirmed that she had received the Chief Constable's advice—it is in the press and I am sure that she has received it privately. From her conclusions today, are we to interpret her remarks as confirming that, at this stage, she has heard the advice, but chosen to ignore it?

In summary, the motion is not merely to take note of the atrocities but, as the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) said, to offer a strategy that is a way forward and an attempt to curtail and prevent those atrocities from taking place. There is little point in debating those key issues if we do not put the motion to the vote, which is what we shall do.

The Government response in their amendment seems to ignore the facts. We have all met the same people—from FAIT and other communities—who are doing sterling work, which is often dangerous, to give solace, comfort and help to people on the receiving end of those horrendous and atrocious acts. Intimidation means that many families have to leave Northern Ireland at short notice and be rehoused in mainland Britain.

The Government seem to turn a blind eye to the potentially damaging end game. Their amendment is frankly toothless and offers the House nothing but more of the same. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire pointed out, time is running out.

The fundamental questions are these: first, will the Government accept a position in which all the prisoners have been released, but there is no comparable movement from the paramilitaries on decommissioning or a cessation of violence? We have asked that question a number of times and it has never been answered. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition asked it again during Prime Minister's questions this afternoon and the Prime Minister himself declined to give a straight answer. It really is time that the Minister gave us an unequivocal answer.

Secondly, is the partial implementation of the agreement tolerable to the Government? Can the Minister explain to the House how he and his party expect the smooth operation of a devolved Government when guns remain in the hands of the paramilitaries and violence of the kind that we have discussed today continues unabated? If not, perhaps he can tell us how they hope to obtain movement on those critical issues.

Thirdly, if the agreement has not been implemented in full at the end of two years—we hear time and again from the Government and from the Prime Minister that that is their intention—will the agreement fall? Can it be renegotiated and where will the Government draw a line in the sand, if at all?

The time has come for the Government to face up to the reality on the streets and the estates of Northern Ireland. They need to plan their strategy carefully to achieve the beneficial end game that we all want and to use the law that is at their disposal and that they put on the statute book not a few months ago.

6.43 pm

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Adam Ingram): I shall respond as best I can to all the points that have been raised in the debate. Some of the concluding comments by the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss) send a clear message. He used the language of defeat and failure. We are trying to build confidence to ensure that difficulties from any direction are faced and an attempt is made to achieve reconciliation and find a solution. The language of defeat saps the confidence of people who have spent more than 30 years in very difficult circumstances. I am glad that my party is in government and the hon. Gentleman's party was removed at the last election.

We have had a wide-ranging and clearly useful debate. It has been useful because the issues and arguments that have been raised tonight from both sides of the House lie at the very heart of understanding the process in which we as a society are involved in Northern Ireland.

As usual, my hon. Friend the Member for Newry and Armagh (Mr. Mallon) got to the point at issue with clarity and precision. I thank him for his kind words to myself and my ministerial colleagues. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire

(Mr. Barnes) who has a long-term interest in the subject. He robustly argued his point of view and he is right about the specific issue that we have debated tonight. He referred to other areas of concern—such as exiles and the disappeared—that should never be neglected. The Government do not intend to neglect them.

The hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley) alleged that released prisoners out on licence have been charged since their release. The hon. Gentleman nods in agreement, so I understood him rightly. Not one prisoner who has been released under the scheme has been charged subsequently. The RUC has no evidence that those who were released under the scheme have become re-involved. If such evidence is drawn to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and there has been a breach of licence, clearly the Government would be obliged to take action.

It is true to say that every citizen of the United Kingdom has an interest in achieving a lasting peaceful settlement for Northern Ireland, not least because the terrorist violence over the last 30 years has not been confined to Northern Ireland, but has been visited with tragic effect upon communities and families here in Britain.

It is because of that reality that the country is united behind the Government in what has been achieved to date since the Good Friday agreement last April and what the Government are seeking to achieve for the future with the commitment of the political parties that are signed up to the process and with the support of the overwhelming majority of the people of Northern Ireland.

Everyone in the House, with a few notable exceptions, agrees with those sentiments. The House is also united in its complete and unequivocal condemnation of the spiteful and barbaric paramilitary assaults carried out, for whatever reason, within the various communities that make up Northern Ireland.

All hon. Members who have spoken have expressed in their own way their abhorrence at what these vicious acts mean in human and family terms and the way in which they add to the sum of community division and strife in Northern Ireland. There is not a scintilla of difference between anyone in the House on that point.

The speech by the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) gave graphic details of cases in which terrible things were done to individuals. I would caution him about that. It is all very well wallowing in the gory details, but, as one who speaks to many victims of violence in Northern Ireland, I remind the right hon. Gentleman that others out there do not want to hear about such grief and suffering or see it on their television screens. That is why, when the BBC and other responsible journalists show bodies and the effects of terrorist violence, they do their best to contact the families concerned.

Mr. MacKay: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Ingram: Let me finish my point. The right hon. Gentleman spoke for half an hour. I have just 15 minutes to sum up.

There is a need for sensitivity and I regret that the right hon. Gentleman made such a graphic speech. I shall give way to him and then I shall refer to another point that he made which has been rebutted by one of the families concerned.

Mr. MacKay: Both the victims concerned gave their agreement and went public because they wished the people to know just what had happened. So there has not been any irresponsibility whatever and I suggest that the Minister withdraws those comments, which are a disgrace and quite wrong.

Mr. Ingram: I shall not withdraw because the right hon. Gentleman clearly did not hear what I said.

Mr. MacKay: I did.

Mr. Ingram: I do not doubt for a moment that the right hon. Gentleman may have spoken to some of the families that he listed. However, other families and other victims do not like the parading of such pain and grief. Hundreds, if not thousands, of people have been affected over the past 30 years and I caution the right hon. Gentleman on that basis.

As the Minister with responsibility for victims, I meet many of them. I visited the pathology lab only yesterday and spoke to senior pathologists about what they do on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland. We have had to put counselling support into the victims liaison unit to ensure that its staff—the people who assist me—can cope with much of the pain that they encounter. That is why I caution the right hon. Gentleman to remember that his words can have an adverse impact.

The right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) spoke sensitively about Mrs. Kearney and his tribute to her was genuine. She is a brave women, who is challenging the circumstances in which she finds herself. However, the right hon. Members for Bracknell and for Upper Bann and others have referred to the Chief Constable, who has given interviews and written articles in which he tries to take a rounded approach to the subject and his comments on it. The article of 15 January has already been quoted extensively and extremely selectively, but it will be worth while for me to follow suit and quote selectively the Chief Constable's summation. He says:

"Despite all of these barriers to the ultimate elimination of violence however, there remains a solid basis for optimism and hope for the future."

That is not a defeated Chief Constable, but a man who has to assess all of the problems in his society and who, even knowing what he has to interpret, still looks hopefully toward a vision of a better future.

Mr. Maginnis: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Mr. Ingram: No, I shall not.

Where division exists, it is on our response to the actions that have been described tonight and on how best to put an end to them. Clearly, there are groups and individuals at work in Northern Ireland who seek to bring an end to the whole peace process—indeed, there are some Members of Parliament who want the current

[Mr. Ingram]

process to fail. The right hon. Member for Bracknell indicated that there are those within his own party who might adopt such an approach. Such people reflect the views of a small minority and the Government are determined to ensure that they do not succeed. They are minority voices who represent the past and offer no hope for the future.

The debate has dealt with two distinct ways forward for the current peace process—two separate strands of thinking. The first, set out by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, is to look at the process in the round. It is to look at the history of paramilitary assaults and the backcloth against which previous Governments acted as they sought to drive forward the process, as defined at the time. It is to look at the context within which such actions are being carried out and the motivation behind them. It is to put those actions in the framework of everything else that is happening to create the new building blocks for a new and better society in Northern Ireland.

There is no question that those actions pose a risk to obtaining that new future. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has pointed out what she has done to date to challenge directly those who have influence over those who carry out such acts. She has made clear her determination to base her actions on the very best of security advice as to whether or not the ceasefires are still intact. The Government and the Secretary of State have not been complacent or indifferent to the ever-changing political and security landscape we face in Northern Ireland—far from it. The judgment that has been made is that there is no guarantee that stopping the prisoner release programme will bring an end to paramilitary assaults.

It would be most unwise for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the Government to play brinkmanship with the Good Friday agreement. The hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) made an excellent point in that respect. It is the Government's judgment that for us to indulge in such brinkmanship could place the whole Good Friday agreement in jeopardy. All our efforts to date have been aimed at honouring our commitments under the agreement and pressing others to honour their commitments. We shall not tire of repeating that the Good Friday agreement offers the best way forward for all sections of the community in Northern Ireland.

However, the Government have to weigh all their decisions carefully before acting. We cannot and should not indulge in short-term fixes, as has been demanded by the Opposition and others in today's debate. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said earlier today, previous Governments and Secretaries of State have continued a programme of prisoner releases against a backcloth more violent than the one that we face. In opposition, we judged that those Governments were right to do so, because the ultimate prize was so great, both then and now. In government, we are trying to keep on course a process that offers the best possibility of success.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Ingram: Let me develop my argument. I shall deal with the points raised by Opposition Members and then we shall see whether they want to argue them.

The other strand of thinking that has been advanced in the debate is that the Government should bring a halt to the early release programme. However, no arguments have been put forward as to why it is thought that to do so will result in a reduction of such actions, or bring about a better climate, with the prospect of more progress being made on the implementation of the Good Friday agreement. The right hon. Member for Bracknell said he would establish that point—that he would set out the basis for his arguments and prove the results—but he did not do so. He did not provide evidence for what the consequences would be, but simply gave an analysis of what he thought was desirable without justifying his conclusions.

Mr. Moss: Will the Minister give way?

Hon. Members: Give way.

Mr. Ingram: I shall give way in a moment.

Instead of the Government's strategy, which offers what we consider to be the best possibility of success, we are being urged to embark on a course of action that will almost certainly lead to failure. We know that the Opposition are genuinely committed to the Good Friday agreement, as are most, if not all, of the other parties represented in the House. However, the Opposition are advocating a punitive response, without supplying any evidence that it will produce the desired result. That response is at variance with, and contrary to, what the Conservative party did in government. The only conclusion that I can draw is that they are playing party politics with people's lives.

Mr. Moss: Will the Minister give way?

Hon. Members: Give way.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. It is entirely up to the Minister whether or not he gives way, and persistence will not necessarily be successful unless the Minister is willing to give way.

Mr. Ingram: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Robathan: The Minister is scared stiff.

Mr. Ingram: That is a silly comment—it is not something that can ever be said of me.

I shall quote a small article that appeared in today's *Belfast News Letter*. It is headed, "Hague 'using terror victims'" and states:

"The wife of a man maimed by loyalist paramilitaries last night accused Tory Party leader William Hague of using the issue of paramilitary attacks for political ends.

Linda Peden, whose husband Andrew lost both legs in a UVF 'punishment' shooting, was incensed that Mr. Hague had cited her husband's case in his call for the suspension of prisoner releases."

Before I used that article, I got my office to contact Mrs. Peden to ensure that the story was accurate and that she had no objection to my using her name in the debate. She said that she was happy for me to do so, so that her message was put across.

Mr. Moss: Like the Secretary of State during our previous debate on the subject, the Minister has repeated

the half-truth that was also peddled by the Prime Minister this afternoon. The release of prisoners under the previous Government is in no way the same as the current policy of the Labour Government. We simply amended the remission dates in line with those of the United Kingdom mainland. We did not include lifers, whereas the current Government have included all life prisoners, and all prisoners will ultimately be released.

Mr. Ingram: I shall place in the Library of the House some of the details of those who have been released so as to set out the long-term prisoners, some of whom were involved in planning terrorist acts, who were let out under the early release programme set in motion by the previous Government.

Mr. Moss: Not lifers.

Mr. Ingram: Defining the difference between lifers and long-term prisoners—do the Opposition want us to base our judgments on that, rather than on what those prisoners plotted to do or what they actually did? The Opposition have sunk very low and it is a matter of great regret that they have done so.

I can now provide the examples that I mentioned earlier. Two prisoners who were under sentences of 18 years for conspiracy to murder were released. One prisoner was released from a sentence of 17 years for conspiracy to cause explosions. One prisoner was released from a sentence of 14 years for possession of firearms and explosives and attempted murder. One of the prisoners released had been convicted of involvement in a ghastly sectarian murder—the murder of two Catholic girls in a mobile chip shop in Portadown. Those are just some examples of the people whom the previous Government released. We never criticised. We recognised the benefit of that process.

I do not have time to deal with the other points that have been raised or further to concede the Floor. I ask that the motion be defeated and that the amendment be carried.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 141, Noes 343.

Division No. 49] **[7 pm**

AYES

Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forsythe, Clifford
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McCartney, Robert *(N Down)*
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Maginnis, Ken
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paisley, Rev Ian
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ross, William *(E Londy)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Thompson, William
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Trimble, Rt Hon David
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mrs. Caroline Spelman and Mr. Stephen Day.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent

Cabom, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Gapes, Mike
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Gorrie, Donald
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McGrady, Eddie
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mallon, Seamus
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sanders, Adrian
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
Welsh, Andrew
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Willis, Phil
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil

Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Jamieson and
Mr. Greg Pope.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments), and agreed to.*

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House condemns absolutely the barbaric practice of paramilitary attacks in Northern Ireland, condemns the human and material cost of these assaults and the contempt they demonstrate for the rule of law; notes the commitment made by all parties who endorsed the Good Friday Agreement to "the protection and vindication of the human rights of all"; welcomes the Government's determination to fulfil its responsibilities under the Good Friday Agreement in this as in every other area; and calls on all people, parties and organisations to use all their influence to bring these attacks to an immediate stop, to help the police in any way they can, and to work to build on the Good Friday Agreement to create a society in Northern Ireland where such attacks are a thing of the past.

London Underground

[Relevant documents: The Seventh Report from the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, Session 1997–98, on London Underground (HC 715-I) and the Government's Response thereto (CM 4093).]

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): We now come to the debate on the London Underground. The Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

7.15 pm

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): I beg to move,

That this House condemns the Government's delay in the financial restructuring of London Underground; calls on it to put forward plans, as soon as possible, for the private finance and operation of the Underground; condemns its handling of the completion of the Jubilee Line; and abhors the abolition of financial support from 2000 with no alternative sources of funding in place.

There is widespread and growing concern that London Underground is failing—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Will hon. Members who are not staying for the debate please conduct conversations outside the Chamber?

Mr. Ottaway: There is widespread and growing concern that London Underground is failing to provide the expected quality of service. Despite substantial investment in the core network in the 1980s and 1990s, delays and service interruptions are routinely reported on news bulletins. Complaints regularly feature in newspaper letter columns, and public displays of customer anger and frustration are becoming more frequent.

Under the headline, "The Tube service no one in power cares about", the columnist Simon Jenkins recently wrote in the *Evening Standard* that London has two tribes: those who travel on the tube and those who do not. He described the former as

"a tribe of moles, bruised, pasty-faced and lost to the call of the clock."

He continued:

"For millions of working Londoners, the Tube is their only experience of Third World squalor. They may not visit London's prisons, mental hospitals or sweat-shops. They may not frequent the ghettos of Hoxton or the tenements of Walworth. They live in tidy homes, work in neat offices and eat in clean restaurants. But they use the Tube. It is the nastiest thing they do."

Notwithstanding the writer's licence to produce a few artistic flourishes, there is a grain of serious truth in those remarks.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that such an article could have been written at any time in the past 18 or 19 years under the Conservative Government?

Mr. Ottaway: Some would say that it could have been written at any time in the past 50 years, but it happens to have been written 18 months into this Government and it had not been written before.

In his statements on the underground last year, the Deputy Prime Minister ignored the level of investment of the past decade, which dwarfs anything that the

[Mr. Ottaway]

Government are spending today. Instead, he apportioned blame for the current state of affairs on the former Greater London council and the previous Government. It must be said that one can never invest enough in the underground, as the Minister of Transport is only too aware, but, whatever the merits or otherwise of the Deputy Prime Minister's statement and despite the lack of investment by Governments in the 1960s and 1970s, it is clear that this Government must now shoulder responsibility for the present situation and, in particular, for their failure to provide any hope of improvement in the foreseeable future.

The delay in any policy development is utterly regrettable. After 18 years of Labour preparing its policy in opposition and as we approached the last general election, the then shadow transport spokesman, the right hon. Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith), urged a future Labour Government to get moving straight away with a public-private partnership. Admittedly, that was the same speech in which he said that he would not privatise air traffic control, but he gave the impression that Labour was raring to go with its plans for London Underground.

During the Opposition day debate in June 1997—after the election—the Government moved an amendment applauding their

"swift action on options for public-private partnership to improve the Underground".

The then Minister of Transport kept up a brisk pace, saying that he would not be paying his financial advisers much because,

"we shall be using them for only a few months".—[*Official Report*, 25 June 1997; Vol. 296, c. 866-9.]

I am sure that he now regrets those words.

In January 1998 the tone changed. There was no talk of "swift action", just a great deal of self-congratulation; but our hopes were raised in March last year when the Deputy Prime Minister announced that he was going to make a statement on London Underground. What did he say after 10 months' of brainstorming on a new policy? Wait for it, Mr. Deputy Speaker—he said that he was going ahead with the public-private partnership for London Underground, and that is all he said. However, our worst fears were realised when he said that it would take him at least until the new Greater London authority was launched in May 2000 to put his plan in place. That is three years after the general election—but it did not stop there.

During the Second Reading of the Greater London Authority Bill, the Deputy Prime Minister caught us all on the hop—he said that he was not going to be rushed. Well, that is one pledge that he has kept. Supported by inspired leaks, he implied that it might be towards the latter part of 2000 before any public-private partnership was in place. Here we go—this is the brave new world for London Underground: not a single step taken by the private sector for three and a half years after Labour came to office, and when anything happens, it will be only a few engineers turning up in Ruislip or Cockfosters. By the next general election, there will be no tangible improvement to the underground.

It is also becoming increasingly apparent that there is a black hole in London Underground's finances. The Minister needs to tackle three fundamental issues. The first is the financial situation in April 2000. The Government's comprehensive spending review makes it clear that all Government grant to London Underground ceases in April 2000. That is just 14 months away, and the House and London Underground are entitled to know what the Government's funding plans are from then on.

The second issue that the Minister has to tackle is the grave doubts about London Underground's ability to be self-financing. In its evidence to the Select Committee, London Underground said that it would need an operating surplus of at least £400 million a year to meet investment requirements and to stop the backlog in investment getting any larger. Based on a surplus last year of £265 million, it said that it believed it could get its surplus up to the required £400 million in three ways: a 13 per cent. volume increase in passengers, a 13 per cent. reduction in unit costs, and annual fare increases of 1 per cent. in real terms. It defies belief for the Government to argue that that is achievable.

A 13 per cent. volume increase in passengers means another 100 million passengers on the tube each year. At the same time, no extra capacity is planned. What does the Minister think the reaction to that would have been in Baker Street, Bond Street and Green Park stations, where last week, passengers were jammed into trains like sardines? At peak times, the tube is already full to capacity—the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) knows that because he was stuck in a tube at the time.

Does the Minister really think that a 13 per cent. reduction in unit costs is achievable, when the Government are having to bribe construction workers on the Jubilee line with bonuses just to do the job that they have been contracted to do? The one thing that we know the Government are capable of doing is putting up fares—they have just increased fares by twice the rate of inflation.

The Minister of Transport (Dr. John Reid): Is the hon. Gentleman against bonuses in principle? If so, why, during the 18 years that the Tories were in government, did he never once complain when huge bonuses were paid in the City, especially in the privatised utilities? Why is it all right for the fat cats to get bonuses, but no one else?

Mr. Ottaway: If that is all that the right hon. Gentleman can come up with, this is going to be a pretty rum debate. The truth of the matter is that the electricians on the Jubilee line have a contract, but they have been holding the Minister to ransom and he has given in to their demands because they are the union paymasters.

As I was saying, the one thing that the Government have done is to put fares up. Indeed, they have just put them up by twice the level of inflation. It is interesting to compare that with the situation on the railways. On the underground, there are fare increases and break-even investment. On the privatised railways, there are fare cuts and a level of investment that the underground would die for.

The third problem that the Minister has to address is whether London Underground can become self-financing. It is its inability to be self-financing that is undermining the Minister's plans for the public-private partnership.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): The previous Government cut investment in London Underground by

£378 million, whereas this Government have reinstated some £365 million. How does the hon. Gentleman square the financial circle without investment and without increasing fares? How would he do it, or is he financially illiterate?

Mr. Ottaway: Before the hon. Gentleman makes an intervention like that, he should take a closer look at the facts. In their last 10 years in office, the Conservative Government invested a total of £7 billion, or £700 million a year, in London Underground, compared with this Government's £500 million a year. Also, I suspect that the hon. Gentleman is looking at the figures in the spending review for 1998–99, which show that the total level of expenditure would be down to £250 million. That earlier investment was state investment; on top of that would have been the money from the privatisation that our party would have got on with by now, recycling funds and adding investment, thus taking it to levels that Labour could never have dreamed of.

Mr. Davies *rose—*

Mr. Ottaway: The hon. Gentleman is coming back for more.

Mr. Davies: Does the hon. Gentleman have any idea what the projected investment would have been under privatisation, or was the project just pie in the sky and not thought out? What really happened was that the previous Government slashed expenditure in the run-up to the election. Also, there was no private finance initiative or any real partnership with the private sector under the previous Administration, only hot air.

Mr. Ottaway: The hon. Gentleman can be excused because he was not in the House in February 1997, but we made it absolutely clear in a statement on 25 February 1997 that investment would be in the region of three quarters of a billion pounds a year—again topping anything that Labour has tried to do. It is here in the record, in black and white, for everyone to see. Does the hon. Gentleman want to come back for another go?

Mr. Clive Efford (Eltham): The hon. Gentleman says that privatisation would have improved the underground. Does he believe that his constituents get a good service from the railway network that his Government privatised at a bargain basement price?

Mr. Ottaway: I should have thought that, as an ex-London cabbie, the hon. Gentleman would know that the London underground does not go to Croydon. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Efford: I was talking about privatisation of the rail network, as the hon. Gentleman well knows. His hon. Friends are shouting loudly because they do not want to hear the facts. If he can get them to be quiet, perhaps he could answer my question. Does the hon. Gentleman believe that his constituents get a decent service from the rail network that his Government privatised at a bargain basement price?

Mr. Ottaway: I can do no more than quote the Deputy Prime Minister, who said that he did not honestly think that people really cared whether the railway was privately or publicly owned, and that they just wanted a good system.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): Will my hon. Friend invite the hon. Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford) and all the other Labour Members to Southend-on-Sea where the rail line used to be referred to as the misery line? As a regular traveller, I found that trains were constantly an hour late; the conditions were terrible, the trains were deplorable and there was no investment. Since the service was privatised, the service is vastly improved, and we are getting new rolling stock. If anyone doubts the improvements, let them come to Southend, where they will see that the line is much changed for the better since privatisation.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We seem to have been led into a siding. We should get back to the London underground.

Mr. Ottaway: I should hate to be diverted, Mr. Deputy Speaker. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor) makes a powerful point, as always.

We welcome the Government's decision to involve the private sector in London Underground. There are many forms of private finance initiative. The Government's preferred option is to award long-term contracts for the maintenance of the infrastructure and to leave the operations in the public sector. We do not agree with that format, but we must live with it.

In his statement, the Deputy Prime Minister proudly said that his plans for the private sector were a £7 billion investment programme over the next 15 years. That sounds all very well until one starts to probe the statement. First, the proposed investment compares badly with the £7 billion invested by the previous Government in the 10 years from 1987 to 1997.

Secondly, the present level of investment is about £500 million a year. One does not have to be a genius to work out that, over 15 years, that would come to £7.5 billion, so there will be nothing new or significantly different from the level of cash that is already going into London Underground, except for one highly relevant factor.

Under the Deputy Prime Minister's plans, that money is not a Government grant; it is a private sector investment and the private sector will want it back. Out of London Underground's proceeds, we shall have to pay back the £7 billion, plus interest. A pay-back period of up to 30 years is planned, but that exacerbates the situation. In my judgment, it is virtually impossible to write a 30-year infrastructure contract in an era when technical changes move so rapidly.

Not surprisingly, many of the private companies involved are having serious doubts about the viability of the entire project. It came as no surprise that the much-respected *Construction News* stated:

"Only half the firms bidding for the £11 billion revamp of London's Tube network believe the project will go ahead.

Fresh doubts over the future of the scheme have surfaced after London Underground's decision to ditch its original plan to have the deal signed by May 2000.

Contractors are concerned that the scheme in its present form fails to stack up financially.

The level of scepticism among firms is highlighted in a *Construction News* survey of the 20 bidders. One angry contracting boss said: 'It's a dog's breakfast.' Another frustrated bidder said: 'It concerns me that there is actually any will for this to go ahead.'

Even London Underground's former director of civil engineering, David Hornby, admitted: 'The timetables were always very optimistic.'

Construction News quizzed senior sources with these firms and only 10 thought the project would definitely go ahead in its current form. None thought the original timetable was realistic. One said: 'They don't know what they want out of it apart from a lot of private cash without ceding any control. Nobody knows what the real risks are.'"

That quotation goes to the root of the problem. The private sector is making it clear that it is not prepared to carry the unknown risk. If the Government want to keep control, they will have to underwrite the investment. The snag is that, such is the high-risk nature of the project, such a guarantee would inevitably go on to the public sector borrowing requirement. Having just got shot of the subsidy to London Underground, the Treasury is hardly likely to take that on.

The truth of the matter is that the Government's plans are in deep trouble. We have the severest doubts whether the public-private partnership will ever get off the ground. In our view, the concept as currently proposed is doomed, and the only loser will be London's public.

Equally serious is the issue of the transfer of London Underground to the Greater London Authority. Grant will stop next year; a partnership will be put in place in a couple of years; and the whole lot will be handed to the mayor, who will be told, "This is your problem now."

The present state of affairs is unacceptable. We all know that the Deputy Prime Minister is making a pig's ear of the policy, but it is adding insult to injury to expect Londoners to pick up the pieces.

A central feature of the mayoral election will be the candidates' proposals for sorting out London's transport problems. It is unacceptable that the mayoral candidates will have no idea of the nature of the contracts being negotiated. *[Interruption.]* Perhaps they may have a quiet word with the hon. Member for Brent, East. Perhaps such a facility will be made available to other candidates.

The Government should conclude their negotiations by this autumn, so that all is clear to the candidates involved, or the final negotiations should be concluded by the new mayor, and he should—[HON. MEMBERS: "Or she."]—he or she should have the final say.

The new authority will have to pay back the private contractors their £7 billion, plus interest. To do that will require at least £750 million a year. London Underground can raise £300 million. The mayor will have to make up the difference. The only tool that the Government are giving him is road user charging.

Notwithstanding the fact that London is almost certainly the worst place in the whole of Great Britain to start the first road-pricing scheme, it is provisionally estimated that road pricing will bring in about £300 million a year, with motorists passing 130 pricing points. That is a shortfall of £150 million for the mayor.

Already 83 per cent. of Londoners travel by public transport, and only 17 per cent. use the private motor car. Of those, many are obliged to do so because they work unsociable hours—for example, nurses, or mothers driving their children to school, or the disabled who rely on their own transport. Why on earth should those people be expected to pay for the Government's dog's breakfast of a public-private partnership?

Mr. Roger Casale (Wimbledon): I have been following the hon. Gentleman's speech closely, looking for some sign that he wants the underground to be run in the public interest. Does he accept that public-private partnerships may be in the public interest, or is he still wedded to the discredited philosophy of his party in the 1980s that the public interest can be served only by full privatisation?

Mr. Ottaway: The hon. Gentleman has missed the point. His own deputy leader said that it does not matter whether London Underground is in the public or the private sector. We believe that private sector involvement not only in the management of the infrastructure but in the operation is highly desirable.

Why should the vulnerable of London underwrite a package that the Transport Committee described as a "convoluted compromise"? If I were the first mayor of London, I would stand up for those people and reject any notion of the Government dumping the debt on Londoners. In our opinion, road pricing is not necessarily the best way of raising funds for the underground. Why should the mayor not have the discretion to borrow if he considers it appropriate? Why should he not have the power to raise funds by bond issues, as is the case in New York?

We urge the Government to break out of their anti-motorist mind set, particularly as there is no guarantee that the Treasury will not nab the funds from road pricing and put them in the Consolidated Fund. The Deputy Prime Minister said that the money would be ring-fenced for 10 years. That is not good enough. Any proceeds from road pricing must be spent on transport in perpetuity.

Furthermore, our faith in the Government's ability to make all their proposals work is shaken all the more when we learn that the operational control of the underground is to stay in the public sector. The people who bring us today's hopeless service are the very people who will be doing so tomorrow. They are the management on whom Londoners will be relying to clear the huge debt imposed on them. The Government have shown a complete lack of faith in the present management by bringing in Bechtel to finish the Jubilee line. In the Government's opinion, London Underground does not have the management skills to do the job. Leaving operations in the public sector is the worst of all worlds, and no doubt raises concerns among bidders.

If one really wants to see how the Government run the country, one has only to look at their management of the Jubilee line. In June 1997, the Minister for Transport in

London said that construction work was drawing to a close, engineering work was well under way and the line would be open by the end of September 1998. In February 1998, she said that it would open in spring 1999. At the end of June, she confirmed her thinking, saying that a thorough review of the programme has been undertaken and she planned to open the entire line in spring 1999. Then, disaster struck. The Government went away for their summer holidays. They took their eye off the ball and, by October, were saying that the line would not be open fully until late autumn 1999.

Ms Linda Perham (Ilford, North): Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that, more than two years ago, when tunnelling problems increased costs from £1.9 billion to £2.6 billion, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) reduced the Government's contribution to £100 million and told London Transport to find the rest? What commitment to completing the Jubilee line on time did that show?

Mr. Ottaway: Why did the Minister say after the general election that she was confident that the line would open in 1998? She was perfectly happy with the contract and the finance that she was getting. The truth is that she has failed to deliver on her early pledge.

Mr. Ken Livingstone (Brent, East): In the light of the problems that—I think—both parties have had with the Jubilee line, does the Opposition spokesperson now deeply regret his Government's decision in 1982 to refuse to allow the then Labour Greater London council to build the line? It would now have been operating for eight or nine years. The short-termism and refusal to invest of Mrs. Thatcher's Government have denied London that functioning line for the past decade.

Mr. Ottaway: If the hon. Gentleman were still running London's transport, we would still be waiting for the Jubilee line. So incompetent was his management of London's transport that, in 1984, we had to take it away from him.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): As the hon. Member who represents areas in which the largest stretch of the Jubilee line extension runs, I say to the hon. Gentleman that, at this stage in the proceedings, it does nobody any good to undermine the almost certain prospect that the Jubilee line will be finished on time. Management, new management, the Government and London Regional Transport have put themselves out to ensure a line worthy of the next century. Talking it down, making it sound as if it will not succeed, when we want people to visit London and use London transport, is the absolute opposite of the approach that we should be taking to the Jubilee line extension.

Mr. Ottaway: The hon. Gentleman is being a little pious. Completion of the line is within the Government's gift to deliver. If he wants something done, and since he is part of a coalition with the Government, he should talk to them about it—unless his intervention was merely part of his leadership campaign.

There is every doubt that the line will not be operational by the end of this year. The millennium dome project was proudly conceived by the previous Conservative Government, but is being messed up by this Government. In 11 months' time, the eyes of the globe will be on Greenwich as we enter the new millennium. We shall be the laughing stock of the world if the Jubilee line is not fully operational and the Minister for Transport in London is bussing people through the Blackwall tunnel as part of her contingency plan.

But then, this Government's management of the London underground is already the laughing stock of the nation. Gone is the previous Government's vision that brought us the docklands light railway, the Jubilee line extension, the Croydon tramlink, modernisation of the East London line and Thameslink 2000. In contrast, this Government have absolutely no plans whatever. London faces fare increases, more overcrowding and less reliability. The Government do not know where the money will come from, they expect Londoners to pick up the tab, and they are waiting for the mayor to solve their problems, as if he were some magician. The public will not buy it.

7.45 pm

The Minister of Transport (Dr. John Reid): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

notes that the Government inherited a substantial investment backlog in London Underground and that this backlog arose from the previous Government's ideological antipathy to public expenditure and unwillingness to seek genuine and viable partnership between the public and private sectors; welcomes the Government's rejection of the Conservatives' policy of wholesale privatisation and applauds it for its thoroughgoing investigation of a public-private partnership as a means to secure necessary investment funds; notes that by providing additional funding of £365 million and that by bringing forward two Private Finance Initiative deals on ticketing and the power distribution system, the Government has already ensured that the Underground will benefit from around £1 billion of investment over the next two years; and is confident that the present Government's approach to London Underground will secure value for money for passengers and the taxpayer and give Londoners an underground system which meets their needs, is fast, reliable, comfortable and worthy of such a great capital city.

I approach the Dispatch Box with trepidation. This is the first occasion on which I have led for the Government as Minister of Transport. Over the weekend, I wondered who would be facing me, because, as the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) knows, there were constant rumours of changes to his transport team. The shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), displayed his confidence in the transport team by suggesting that they should bring in a new recruit who has

"great insight into the motoring industry. We would be interested in getting together"—

presumably in another bonding session. He was referring to none other than Mr. Vroom Vroom himself, Jeremy Clarkson, recently of television's "Top Gear".

Perhaps I put two and two together and made five when I saw that the Tories were thinking of recruiting Mr. Clarkson, because that attempted press-ganging of the reluctant Mr. Clarkson into the Tory team coincided remarkably with a story that the shadow Transport Secretary was about to be sacked. I noticed that that has changed. I hope that it was not only because Mr. Clarkson politely declined the offer extended to him, by saying:

"The idea of working for the Conservative Party is ridiculous."

[Dr. John Reid]

I have waited a long time to say that I entirely agree with every word of Mr. Jeremy Clarkson.

The first thing that strikes me about the Opposition motion is that it does not once mention the word "passenger". If the underground in London and the London transport system are not about passengers, then they are about nothing. That is the litmus test of the motion.

I listened very carefully to the hon. Member for Croydon, South. I heard him speak about the vulnerable and the desperate need to protect those who are deprived and who do not have a car. At one stage, he mentioned the homeless. There are three statements that always stretch my incredulity. The first is, "Your cheque is in the post," the second is, "I will love you all the more for it in the morning," and the third is, "I am a Tory, and deeply concerned about the vulnerable and public transport."

It is noticeable that the Conservative party in opposition has sponsored three debates on the London underground. That stands in marked contrast to its reluctance to debate the London underground when it was in power. In the five years of the previous Parliament, the Conservative party, which is supposedly concerned about the London underground, could not find the time on one single occasion to debate the subject which they are now declaring to be so important. What wisdom the Tories have achieved in hindsight. What commitment they apparently have now that they have neither power nor responsibility. After listening to the speech of the hon. Member for Croydon, South, I must also say what self-righteousness they now have in their selective and collective amnesia.

The Government are picking up the pieces after 18 years in which the Conservative party, through its neglect and abandonment of any responsibility for it, allowed the London underground to decay and degenerate. Conservative Members have the gall to criticise a Government who have been in power for 20 months.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): Thousands of people travel into London from Hertfordshire to work. They arrive at King's Cross and get on the Victoria line. Over the past two years, the underground trains have become more and more packed. The overcrowding is serious, so can the Minister point to a single measure that he has taken, or is going to take, that will ease overcrowding on the Victoria line for my constituents?

Dr. Reid: I will come to that issue later, but a Conservative Member saying, "Put us in charge, because we will make the underground just like Connex trains" will not bring people flocking to the banner of conservatism. Our knowledge that the essence of those problems springs directly from the almost criminal negligence of the previous Government does not in any way diminish our determination to face up to the challenges.

We do not underestimate the seriousness of the tasks that we face in respect of the London underground, and we know that, wherever the blame lies, Londoners are more interested in the problems being rectified than in the buck being passed. We will face up to those challenges, not only because London is a major city, an influential city or a capital city, but because it is a great city. It is pre-eminent in terms of the extent of its boundaries, the size of its population, the wealth that it generates, its importance as a global financial centre and—perhaps above all—the burden of its history and the meaning of that in the history of this country.

London is the most populous city in the European Union, something that creates challenges for the transport system. It has 7 million residents in an area covering 1,578 sq km and it is a massive centre of finance, commerce and industry. London's gross domestic product stood at £93,450 million in 1996, and it has by far the highest GDP per head in the United Kingdom. It accounts for about a quarter of all businesses in the United Kingdom with a turnover of £5 million or more.

With all that, no one could fail to take London's transport system seriously, and such a great city deserves a great transport system. Transport in London represents the arteries of commercial and economic life, social activity and tourism. Although there has been continued growth in the use of the private car in Great Britain over the past 15 years, the number of car journeys in Greater London has fallen.

On an average week day, more than 1 million people come into central London during the morning peak, and more than 80 per cent. of them use public transport. Within London in 1997-98, passenger travel totalled nearly 4.4 billion passenger kilometres on the buses and 6.5 billion passenger kilometres on the underground. That is a massive amount, which is up 5 per cent. on the previous year. Passenger traffic on the docklands light railway has more than trebled since 1992–93.

Those figures alone show that the London public transport system is vital. Within that system, the underground is central.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I do not dissent from anything that the Minister has said so far. Does he accept that, if we are to achieve an underground and a public transport system in London for the next generation, it should be owned by the people who will use it? The logic of that position is that, although the Government are right to be working on getting the system ready, agreement on the system and decisions about financing it should be left to the new London authority. If that does not happen, whoever runs London will be able to say, "It's not our fault. The Government put us in this mess."

Dr. Reid: I agree with the first part of what the hon. Gentleman said, but the second part does not follow from his premise. I believe that Londoners, as well as the Government, want a publicly owned and publicly accountable system, operated in the public interest.

I also believe that we should keep all the operations of the London underground in the public sector—something that we fully intend to do—and make the system even more accountable by putting it under the control of the newly elected mayor of London, rather than take the avenue that the Conservatives propose: a rushed, wholesale privatisation where the underground is sold off at a knockdown price—that is what they did with Railtrack—irrespective of the consequences for either Londoners or the Exchequer.

The route that we are taking will reinforce the control and the effectiveness of the accountability system, which will result in a far better operation by London Underground in the long run.

Mr. Hughes: If I had to choose between the Minister's position and that of his Conservative opponents, I should certainly say that wholesale privatisation is not what Londoners want or what experience suggests is the right way forward.

Will the Minister reflect on the point that we are debating? If he and his colleagues do a deal that locks London Regional Transport and London Underground into a financial package, and that package is handed to the new London authority without it having the right to agree to it, alter it or take part in negotiations until their conclusion, the authority cannot be accountable. Its members will always be able to say, "This deal was done before we had control and therefore we are not to blame—nor are we are taking the blame—for anything that goes wrong."

Dr. Reid: First, waiting several more years before even making a start would let down the people of London. Secondly, we want to start at the earliest possible date, so changing the negotiating partner half way through would, in effect, put any deal off for years because no one would enter those negotiations.

We have said that we will undertake that there will be a publicly accountable, publicly owned operation on the underground, that we will enter into negotiations and that we will complete those negotiations. If a mayor is elected in the course of the negotiations, we will do everything in our power to bring him or her into the consultation process. In the world that we have inherited from the Conservatives, and following almost two decades of neglect, it would be grossly unfair on Londoners to wait any longer before working through and starting negotiations.

We will not proceed unless we can secure best value for Londoners and for people throughout the country. This is an immensely complex task. We could do what the Opposition have asked: set a final date and tell those with whom we are willing to go into partnership, "By the way, we have to finish by next May." I wish that I played poker with the hon. Member for Croydon, South; to declare one's hand at the beginning of negotiations is virtually to hand over control to the other person. That would not be in the interests of either the people of London or the people of this country.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): I am most grateful to the Minister, who is extremely courteous in giving way.

The Minister travels hopefully towards the destination of a successful outcome to the tenders for the operation of the infrastructure, but there is a likelihood that he may not arrive at such a successful deal. Can he assure that House that, in that eventuality, he will not close his mind to outright privatisation, which happened with the express train link to Heathrow? That is an extremely good example to follow.

Dr. Reid: No. We have made it plain that we will retain the operations of London Underground in the public sector. It will be publicly accountable to the new mayor of London and to the people of London. That is what Londoners want, and what they are proud of, and it is certainly what the Government want. The Opposition's constant allusions to the happy experience of the privatised railways will not draw people to their cause, whatever frustrations are caused by the present difficulties on the tube.

The hon. Gentleman would do better to admit that the privatised railway system has not been without its difficulties, particularly fragmentation. It is for precisely that reason that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and I have engaged with the privatised companies in an attempt to provide a networkwide and strategic dimension. Those are some of the benefits of a publicly controlled operation, and London Underground will remain in that state for as long as we are the Government.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Dr. Reid: I must make some progress first.

Although hon. Members may be familiar with the underground system, I want to give them some idea of the sheer immensity of the project. Most of us think merely in terms of the central area, but the full network stretches far beyond that, serving commuters and communities from Amersham, 27 miles from central London, to Upminster, and from Morden to Epping, 18 miles from the centre. It is a massive complex: 243 miles of railway line, 106 miles of which is in tunnels. It serves 269 stations, the busiest of which—Oxford Circus—handles 90 million passengers a year. The underground has 12 lines, and last year its 4,000 carriages carried 832 million passengers. The commuters and communities served by that network need, indeed demand, an underground system that is modern, frequent and reliable.

I am sorry to say that, in facing the challenges, we start with a system that is not modern, frequent and reliable. That, unfortunately, is the inheritance passed to us by the previous Government. Spurred by their antipathy to public expenditure, their distaste for public ownership and their cavalier attitude to public transport—which they have exhibited this evening—the Tories ran the network into the ground. Owing to those years of chronic underfunding, the hard work of London Transport's staff is constantly undermined and passengers are persistently frustrated as worn-out, unreliable kit fails day after day, rush hour after rush hour.

The Conservatives' reaction was actually to cut the grand plan for London Transport. They made sharp cuts in funding, and, partly owing to the overspend on the Jubilee line extension—which, apparently, was not noticed by the hon. Member for Croydon, South in the four years before the general election, but now is—effectively cut London Underground's budget by nearly 50 per cent. There was a decade of Tory neglect.

The hon. Gentleman seems to think that Tory government started in 1987. Every reference that he made to investment related to that year. A decade of Tory neglect, however—from 1979 to 1989—could not be compensated for by a halting and inconsistent investment plan in the 1990s, which helped to create the mountain of difficulties that we must now overcome.

[Dr. Reid]

By their last year in government, the Tories had abandoned any hope, let alone intention, of investing in the network. They left us with an investment backlog of no less than £1,200 million. That was the legacy of those who have the gall tonight to criticise a 20-month-old Government.

I must tell Opposition Members that it is no surprise that the people of London, faced with such an abdication of responsibility, rightly told the Tories to go away, leaving them with only 11 MPs in the capital. I must also tell them that, if their current approach to London's transport problems continues, there will soon be as many Tory MPs in London as there are reasons for voting for them: none at all.

Unlike the previous Government, this Government have made a start—I claim no more than that—by tackling some of the problems. Lest anyone imagine that there is an ounce of complacency, let me say immediately that my colleagues in the Department and I realise that we have only begun to scale the foothills of the mountain of problems that we inherited from the previous Government. Indeed, in the short term, some of the remedies that we are applying—for instance, updating signals and escalators—may add another frustrating but necessary impediment to the smooth running of the system: necessary because the scale of the problem cannot be tackled without some disruption, and frustrating because the same problems were apparent during the 18 years in which the Tories were in power but did nothing about them.

I know that it is difficult to ask passengers to continue to be patient while stations and escalators are being refurbished and new trains are being brought into service. I recognise that that causes disruption and generates frustrations, especially when there are teething troubles, but at least the problems arising from progress and investment, in contrast to those arising from the neglect of the previous Government, hold out the prospect of a light at the end of the underground tunnel.

I do not hesitate to acknowledge, for instance, that the service on the Central and Northern lines is not up to the standard that passengers rightly expect. Passengers on the Central line are already travelling on new, larger and better trains, but the service is not yet as reliable as it should be. I accept that London Underground is working hard to resolve problems with a signalling technology that is causing some difficulties. It is new technology, which, when it is fully operational, will enhance train frequency and shorten journey times. The priority is to work towards achieving a reliable service.

That problem is typical of problems associated with new investment, rather than investment neglect. On the Northern line, existing rolling stock is being replaced by a fleet of 106 new trains. That brings its own problems: they are the first new trains on the line since 1972. All too often, old trains have broken down; if there are also teething troubles with new trains, that is no less frustrating for passengers because it is associated with renewal—but at least it heralds the prospect of an enhanced service once we come through the current period. Already, 20 new trains are in service. I have met the contractors to discuss a range of issues, and have raised that specific point with them. I know that they intend to introduce more new trains as quickly as possible. Passengers should be able to enjoy a full service, run entirely with new trains, by autumn this year.

There is a difference between problems that will lead to service enhancements and the problems that resulted from the previous Government's neglect and abandonment of responsibility. The current position is a sign that the Government have made addressing London Underground's problems one of our highest priorities. We are tackling the problems head on. We have restructured and strengthened senior management. Last week, we were delighted to announce the appointment of a new chairman of the London Transport board. Sir Malcolm Bates, who has already worked with us on matters connected with the private finance initiative, will take the helm on 11 February. Derek Smith is due to take over as the new managing director of London Underground on 1 February. Both have proven track records, and I am confident that, with the right senior management team, London Transport will be able to meet the challenges that it faces.

We have secured new private investment in new ticketing technology and the power supply of the underground. In August last year, two private finance initiative deals, "power" and "prestige", were signed. They will bring real improvements for passengers. "Power" is worth more than £1 billion. Under that deal, the private-sector contractor will renew the underground's power distribution network, which will make the system more reliable and improve the underground's already impressive safety record. The "prestige" deal is a major ticketing project worth £1 billion, at the heart of which will be the introduction of smart-card ticketing for the first time on the underground and on London buses. Therefore, we have improved management and secured new deals with the private sector.

Above all, we are putting our money where our mouth is. We are providing London Transport with an extra £365 million over the next two years. That will mean that, including PFI, around £1 billion will be invested in the core network over the two years. That means that projects that include investment in track, escalators, embankments, signalling, rolling stock and stations throughout the network will benefit. Investment in projects such as the JLE and the Croydon tramlink will be in addition to that £1 billion. Our approach is in stark contrast with that of the previous Government, who cut planned expenditure to London Transport by some £380 million over the period that we are investing that £1 billion.

That extra funding is not all. It is only the tip of the iceberg in terms of necessary investment. Our proposals for a public-private partnership for the tube will bring a further £7,000 million over the next decade and a half. That partnership will provide the underground with the investment that it needs to meet our aim of a safe, reliable, affordable and modern network. It will mean what matters: faster journey times, increased train service levels as new signalling is introduced, and refurbished and modernised stations. All those have to be judged by the real litmus test: whether passengers perceive that there has been improvement.

I freely admit that, unlike the previous Administration, we did not want full-scale privatisation. Like passengers, staff and taxpayers, we wanted to keep the underground publicly owned and publicly accountable. However, we realised that both the public and private sectors had much

to offer. Our radical approach—a partnership between the two sectors—will secure the investment from the private sector that is necessary to meet our aim of a safe, reliable, affordable and modern network, but keep the underground under the control of the public sector.

Our partnership proposals mean that the infrastructure will transfer to the private sector on the equivalent of a 30-year mortgage, with the public sector taking over the assets again in an improved condition at the end of that period. I stress: the freehold of the network will remain in the public sector throughout the contract.

There has been some criticism by the Opposition over the fact that we are giving that £7 billion project detailed scrutiny. They apparently wish us to declare a deadline. Perhaps they would like us to post the deadline to all possible negotiating partners. If the hon. Member for Croydon, South were asked to form a firing squad, he would have people stand in a circle. I cannot think of anything that is more self-defeating than laying one's hand on the table at a negotiating session and saying to the opposite negotiator, "No matter how hard you bargain, no matter how much I dislike it, I have to tell you that, by next Friday, I will give in." That would unilaterally hand over London Underground infrastructure contracts at a massive loss to the public sector, in exactly the same fashion that the previous Government rushed to judgment on Railtrack, handing assets worth billions of pounds more than they got for them to the private sector. That may be an ideological ideal for the Conservative party. It does not make sense to the people of London or to the taxpayer.

I have made it clear that, in the private-public partnership, the value-for-money proposal will be the criterion against which all our proposals are tested. The Government will not implement a public-private partnership unless we are entirely satisfied that it will secure best value for the taxpayer.

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): My right hon. Friend is making an impressive speech, as he always does. May I take him back to the issue of current investment levels? I heard what he said about the £1 billion, but my concern is that Treasury has put a cap on the amount that it is prepared to put into the Jubilee line construction and that, as the costs soar above that, London Underground will have to find those additional costs from the amount for running the current network. Is there not a case for the Government to reconsider that point and to ensure that Jubilee line costs do not fall on existing passengers in the rest of the network?

Dr. Reid: The costs of the Jubilee line are kept under constant review by Ministers. They are published from time to time, normally quarterly. Our judgment has to be exercised over that matter and we will continue to scrutinise it, but I assure my hon. Friend that the allocation of funds to London Underground is not being affected detrimentally. We have given some £1 billion over the figure that would have been injected by the Conservative party. If I remember correctly as regards the Jubilee line, at least six delays were announced by the previous Government before we came to power. About £500 million was added to the Jubilee line, so none of us should underestimate the difficulties of a massive project such as that line.

I take only one aspect of it—Westminster station. That is the largest man-made hole in Europe. A third line is being driven between two existing lines on the banks of the Thames, and under and next to Big Ben and the House of Commons. The potential for disaster is obvious. Many people might think that the prospect of the House of Commons disappearing into the largest hole in Europe is not entirely a disaster for the nation, but, seriously, that shows some of the problems of the Jubilee line, with which I shall now deal—I am glad that my hon. Friend mentioned it.

I will not belittle the problems that have faced the project and the challenges that remain. There have been delays. Most significantly, in late 1994 and early 1995, major tunnelling work in the project came to a halt for some months. Those related to safety fears over a similar tunnelling method at Heathrow. There was a significant delay. Most people would agree that halting the tunnelling work was the prudent and cautious thing to do because of the safety consideration, but it caused delays and higher costs. In March 1997, before the present Government came to power, London Transport announced that it was not able to meet the original planned opening date of March 1998.

That is the situation that we inherited, but the Government are determined that the new line will open in time for the millennium. In spring last year, we encouraged London Transport to review the project management's arrangements. Bechtel was appointed project manager to drive through the commissioning stage and to help to ensure that the extension was completed in time.

I assure Opposition Members and others that Ministers are sometimes in daily, and always in weekly, contact with London Underground and with Bechtel. My hon. Friend the Minister for Transport in London and I both take a keen interest in the project, not just because it is a matter of transport for London and a state-of-the-art, modern and complex underground line of which we should all be proud, but because it is an element of national pride that, at the millennium, the millennium dome, the village and the project should be completed.

The hon. Member for Croydon, South and his friends should be careful on that one because I am sure that Londoners want the project to succeed. The Government want the project to succeed. The nation wants the Jubilee line to succeed. It appears that only one group of people wishes the Jubilee line to fail: Tory Members. As has been said, the Tories should be careful about undermining the efforts of the rest of us to have this modern, state-of-the-art and prestigious symbol of London finished this year. The Government are determined to do it. I hope that what is happening on the Conservative Benches is not becoming wish fulfilment as they run down and undermine the line and hope that it will fail.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): How can the hon. Gentleman possibly say that Conservative Members want the Jubilee line to fail when it was our Government who started the work and put the money there in the first place? Of course we want it to succeed.

Dr. Reid: I hope that the hon. Lady is the exception that proves the rule. I am sure that other hon. Members and those who read this debate in the morning or hear

[Dr. Reid]

it on the media will have cause to consider whether the Conservative party would glory in something that the rest of the country would regard as a disaster—the non-completion of the Jubilee line.

I would not want the House to underestimate the massive complexity of the task on the Jubilee line or what has been achieved so far. I shall tell the House what has been achieved.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Reid: In a moment.

On the Jubilee line, all the tunnelling is complete, all the track has been laid and all the trains have been delivered. The new stations are structurally complete and, as we speak, trains are being tested under signal control on the line between Stratford and north Greenwich. We are now into the crucial commissioning stage. As I have said, we do not underestimate the task, but we assert the simple fact that, when the Government inherited this project, it needed remedial action. The Government have provided that remedial action.

I have been honest with the House tonight—the Minister for Transport in London has been equally honest on previous occasions—in facing up to the formidable challenge of overcoming our inheritance from the previous Government. Sterling efforts are being made to give this great capital the underground system that it deserves. As a Scotsman, I am proud to be part of that effort because this is the capital city of the United Kingdom, not just of England.

The staff at London Transport are soldiering on. They are coping with the dilapidated infrastructure bequeathed to them. Despite that inheritance, during the last financial year, passenger journeys on London Underground reached record levels. Over 800 million passenger journeys were made last year and, this year, we expect to see a record 860 million journeys.

The Government want those journeys to be something to look forward to, not something to be dreaded. We want passengers to travel in comfort and to have a reliable service. As I have said, the Tory motion does not even mention the word "passenger". I believe that that says a great deal about their attitude to tonight's debate.

It is imperative that we modernise our essential tube system and I am glad to say that, by strengthening the management, bringing in new projects, new technology and new trains and putting in new resources, we have begun to make a successful start on tackling the underground's problems. However, I am the first to acknowledge that we have a long way to go. I hope that we will soon see our proposals for the public-private partnership implemented, but we would rather have them right than have them rushed. When we have them, we can make a real start on improving the infrastructure and, at long last, we will be able to give the citizens of our capital—our premier city—not only the capital investment but the premier performance on the underground that they surely deserve as we enter the new millennium.

8.24 pm

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I have a sense of deja vu tonight as it is exactly a year since the last Tory Opposition day debate on the tube. This is another opportunity to remind Londoners that the Conservative party has primary responsibility for the chaos on the tube today. It was the Tories who organised a fire sale of the tube. They wanted a miserable £800 million for it at a time when it had £13 billion worth of assets. Of course, they hastily dropped that plan when it was leaked to the newspapers. It is the Tories who have left a backlog of repairs—the equivalent of £170 per Londoner.

That is not a partisan view; it is the view of the business community. London First said that

"the last Government cut public funding for the existing system below the level needed even to sustain it in its present condition, in spite of the fact that they accepted that there was a £1.2 billion backlog."

The Confederation of British Industry said that

"there has been a serious under-investment for a long time".

This is an opportunity to consider the Jubilee line extension project—it has been discussed at length. The Tories condemn the Government for their handling of the completion of the line, but what about their record? A number of hon. Members have referred to that record tonight. In October 1993, the original cost was expected to be £1.9 billion. That had increased to £2.76 billion by 1997. In other words, it was 45 per cent. over budget.

When the Tories claim that the Government's inaction jeopardises reliability on the underground, they are right. Their Government's inaction over nearly two decades has left the underground with record levels of breakdowns and under-investment.

Before Labour Members get too excited about what I have been saying, I must now say that, for the sake of Londoners, I wish that, since the election of the new Government, it had been "all change". I am afraid that under-investment in the tube has not changed. In fact, the Labour Government will have invested, on average, 11 per cent. less over the period 1997–2000—the latter being the last year for which figures are available—than the Tory Government spent on average after the 1992 general election.

I will give the Tories credit for the fact that, between 1992 and 1997, they spent more on investment on the underground than the present Labour Government will have spent. In case anyone wants to challenge them, I can tell the House that I obtained the figures today from London Transport's finance director. The figure is about £494 million for the Tory Government and £440 million for the Labour Government.

One thing has changed and that is the prevailing dogma. The Minister mentioned the Conservative ideological antipathy towards public services, but that has been replaced with Labour's obsession with public-private partnerships—the Government's alternative to wholesale privatisation. In July 1997, the Government commissioned a report into the future of the tube from Price Waterhouse. It looked at the various financing options for the tube and would, therefore, have looked at the public-private partnership. The findings of Price Waterhouse have not been made public, in spite of a

request from the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Transport Sub-Committee in its seventh report on London Underground, which recommended that

"the Report from PW, which evaluated the possible financing options for modernising the Underground and the advice submitted by London Transport, should be made public."

Why has that report not been made public? According to the Government's response to the Transport Sub-Committee's report it is because it is

"not in the best interests of the taxpayers and passengers."

Is that really the case? Many would argue the exact opposite. It is in the taxpayers' interest that the information be made public immediately. Only then will we be able to judge whether the public-private partnership proposal is best value.

If the Minister answers just one of the points I have raised tonight, I should like him to say at what point the Government will accept that PPP is or is not best value. If the Minister accepts in a year or two that PPP is not best value, four or five years will have elapsed without any further progress on the tube. I hope that the Minister will respond to that point.

Many other people feel that the information should be in the public domain. For example, I suspect that Peter Ford, the old chairman of London Transport, would have liked it in the public domain. He told the Transport Sub-Committee that the Government's method of breaking the infrastructure into between one and three privately managed concessions would cost £1 billion to £3 billion more than retaining a single, publicly owned organisation.

That view is supported by House of Commons Library research, which estimates an extra capital cost of £70 million for every percentage point that the cost of private capital exceeds the cost of public capital. It is easy to arrive at Peter Ford's figure of £1 billion. If we assume that private money costs about 10 per cent. more than public capital—that is not an unreasonable figure; I have information from the National Audit Office on the extra costs of the Skye bridge project—we arrive at an extra cost of £700 million per year.

That figure is valid if all the money is borrowed up front and is spent on day one, but that will not happen—it is impossible to spend £7 billion on day one. If the £7 billion that the Government have referred to is for the duration of the contract, the additional cost of borrowing the money in the private sector will be about £1 billion, according to Library figures.

The Government's response to the Transport Sub-Committee report suggests that a substantial sum will be spent up front:

"The design of the Public/Private Partnership will be aimed at ensuring that the private sector moves quickly"—

not over the duration of the contract, but quickly—

"to eliminate the backlog and modernise the Underground's infrastructure".

It is fair to assume that a high proportion of that £7 billion will be spent in the early stages of the contract.

The Minister must tell us how much extra this will cost. Will it cost £1 billion extra over the duration of the contract, with the spending spread evenly, or will it be £700 million extra, with the £7 billion spent early in the contract? Where does the true figure lie? Londoners would like to know, because that would help them to establish whether the public-private partnership proposal is best value.

The Government's blind faith in public-private partnership and their belief that it is a panacea that will fill all financial gaps is leading towards a financial solution that will cost the taxpayer and Londoners dear—if the PPP proceeds. The hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) has referred to the story, in *Construction News*, that half the contractors bidding for the PPP do not believe that it will proceed.

If that were not enough bad news, there are also problems with the Government's timing of the public-private partnership proposals. London's mayor and assembly will be elected in May 2000. They will have had no say over the London Underground contract, so they will be able to hide behind a "Not me, guv" attitude on tube cancellations, delays and overcrowding. The Minister is naive if he thinks that they will not respond like that. When overcrowding continues at current levels—no new lines are going to be built as a result of the PPP proposals—the mayor and assembly will deny all responsibility for the deal if their signatures are not at the bottom of the document.

The public-private partnership proposal is either an expensive or a very expensive means of financing improvements to the underground. It may never see the light of day and it will enable the mayor to pass the buck when things go wrong. The hon. Member for Croydon, South has already quoted from the Transport Sub-Committee's report, but it is worth reminding Labour Members that the Committee said of the PPP proposals:

"Treasury rules have forced the adoption of this form of Public/Private Partnership, which is rather a convoluted compromise, when other financial solutions might have been more cost-effective."

In the meantime, the backlog of repairs grows.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I have one more point to add to my hon. Friend's case. If the new London authority inherits something that it has had no opportunity to influence, the problem will go deeper than the authority being able to wash its hands of the issue; the new authority will be undermined. If the people of London think that their authority cannot influence affairs and has no power over one of the most important public services in London, its credibility will be undermined from the start. That will not be good for the government of London on any issue.

Mr. Brake: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. Unfortunately, the situation is even worse, because there are severe doubts about the extent to which the mayor and assembly will be able to influence rail commuter services in London.

In the meantime, the backlog of repairs will grow. The Minister has had the honesty to admit that things are getting worse before they get better. There has been a 20 per cent. increase in signal point failures and rolling stock failures in 1997–98. London Underground is on track for further increases in rolling stock failures this year.

How do we get out of the quagmire? We need to establish a public interest company or trust, with objectives set by the Greater London authority,

[Mr. Brake]

which would be outside the public sector borrowing requirement. The hon. Member for Croydon, South referred to bonds. This is not an untested model. It is similar to arrangements that work acceptably in New York and San Francisco. The Liberal Democrats would will the means to provide the funds that are needed for the investment programme.

The Government are considering—and probably support—the measures that we propose, although the Conservatives do not. We advocate a levy on non-residential car parking spaces. A rough estimate suggests that £150 million a year could be raised from that. We support road congestion charges, provided that a viable public transport alternative is put in place. The London congestion charging research programme suggested in 1995 than between £95 million and £795 million could be raised through road congestion charges. We have also talked about a small increase in business rates for London's largest businesses, which could raise £150 million per annum.

In return, Londoners would get a transport system that was reliable, safe and affordable. They would get cleaner air, fewer cars on the road and a reduction in pollution-related illnesses such as asthma. The Tory Opposition have no solution other than privatisation. The Liberal Democrats—and Londoners—will not back that. Nor will we support the Government's proposals. I do not believe that the Government can demonstrate, as they suggest in the amendment, that their proposals will deliver best value.

The Liberal Democrat proposal—a public interest company backed by ear-marked revenues—would take the tube into the 21st century and, with the Liberal Democrats, Londoners are guaranteed a smooth and safe ride, in comfort and at an affordable cost.

8.39 pm

Mr. Ken Livingstone (Brent, East): It is absolutely monstrous to be lectured by the Conservative party about neglect of the tube. Let us look at the figures that I jotted down while we were being lectured. Back in 1991, after the Conservative Government had been running London Transport since 1984, the Monopolies and Mergers Commission condemned them in a report that said that there was a backlog of maintenance and repair on the tube that would require an investment of £700 million to £750 million a year for 10 years to be cleared.

Initially, under the embarrassment of that report, the Conservative Government came up with £632 million for 1992–93, but, by the time that we got to the last full year of Conservative rule, the figure had been halved, with an investment of only £371 million to clear the backlog. There was additional funding for the Jubilee line, but that was not part or parcel of the MMC report.

It was absolutely monstrous of the Conservatives then to complain when one of the first acts of the Deputy Prime Minister was to put in another £365 million to revive the programme. I welcome that investment, just as I welcome his replacement of Mr. Ford, who had an agenda that was not in the interests of Londoners. Having said that, I am not yet convinced of the Government's case on the funding arrangements, for all the reasons that we have heard.

Mr. Jenkin: I once went to the Library to try to find out what the capital investment in the London underground was under the Greater London council when the hon. Gentleman was its leader. The Library told me that the GLC accounts were so opaque that it was impossible to tell.

Mr. Livingstone: The accounts were subject to the approval of the district auditor and we never had any complaints about them.

One of the first acts of the Conservative Government when they came to power in 1979 was to pass legislation removing from local authorities any power to determine their own capital programmes. In the early days of Mrs. Thatcher's Administration, we lost the power to buy a bus or a train or to build a council house without the prior approval of the Department of the Environment.

Every year, under both Labour and Conservative leaderships, GLC leaders and their transport chairs had to trek across to beg the Department of the Environment to allow us to invest more in the tube, and every year we were sent away without our requirements being met. Investment in London Transport was determined by the Conservative Government in every year from 1980. They effectively had control of the capital investment programme for the best part of two decades, and they can blame no one but themselves for the chaos that they have left us to sort out.

I have been deeply impressed over the years by the Chancellor's commitment to prudence and to getting value for money. It seems to me that the entire public-private partnership will hinge on a simple bottom-line calculation of what is the cheapest way for Londoners to pay for the modernisation of their tube system.

If the public-private partnership comes up trumps and turns out to be cheaper than the other options that we have heard about from the Liberal Democrats, that would be fine, but it is likely—although I have to confess that this is a wicked calculation by the trade union concerned, the RMT—that the rate of return that the private sector will require for such investment may be between 20 and 25 per cent. Who in his right mind would take out a 30-year mortgage on a house at a rate of interest of 20 to 25 per cent? It is an absolute nightmare.

I strongly suspect that we will have to take a difficult decision at the end of this great exercise and consider how much cheaper it would be if we were allowed to have a bond issue to fund the investment. That works perfectly well in New York. In a sense, the Government have moved a good step in that direction. My dear and right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), before his demise, made the breathtaking, bold and radical left-wing gesture of allowing the Post Office finally to slough off the shackles of the Treasury and start raising funds in the market for a programme of expansion.

If we can do that for the Post Office, why not for London transport? One could even consider a tax increase, although I know that that is horrendously off message. I find remarkable acceptance among major City institutions for an increase in their business rate or a new

tax on business in London, provided that it was ring-fenced for the modernisation of the tube. That is a sea change in the attitude of City institutions to taxation. I strongly suspect that, if Londoners were told honestly that an additional sum would be put on the council tax so that the domestic sector could make a contribution—although one that, perhaps, would not match that of the private sector—the money could be raised through taxation.

It would be jarring for Londoners to be told by a Government so dominated by people from other regions of the country what they should and should not be doing with their own money, when there is a willingness among Londoners to pay for the investment. There are many problems to solve before the Government will be able to persuade Londoners. The opinion polls show that Londoners overwhelmingly reject the public-private partnership, and remain committed to the tube remaining completely and utterly within the public sector.

Mr. Brake: Is the hon. Gentleman aware of a report in *The Guardian* on the public-private partnership in relation to National Air Traffic Services, in which the Civil Aviation Authority expressed concern about the safety implications of the public-private partnership? Does he agree that the Government should reconsider their position on the matter?

Mr. Livingstone: The evidence from the RMT on the old British Rail service—which suggested that probably illegal immigrants from Croatia who did not speak English were responsible for looking after safety equipment on the railways, and were unable to read the instructions on safety equipment—was very worrying. Directly employed people, accountable to the public sector, are much safer than fly-by-night operators, who are often picking people off the corner at busy London junctions and driving them to do cash-in-hand work in vital areas of public safety.

There is one danger that the Government may not have fully anticipated. As the programme has slipped back, we have got to the point where no final decision will be made before the mayor and the assembly are elected. I am a responsible person and, if selected, I shall run on the Labour party policy—heaven forfend that I should do anything else. However, suppose a candidate turned the election into a referendum on the issue of the public-private partnership and called on Londoners to reject it at the ballot box?

What could the Government do if a mayoral candidate were elected on a specific, primary commitment—above everything else in the election—to oppose the introduction of public-private partnership and to put forward other options, such as the bond issue or taxation? Would the Labour Government reject the clearly expressed will of Londoners at the ballot box? I hope that, in the Minister's reply tonight, we will be given some idea about that. As the operation has slipped back, it has offered Londoners the option at the ballot box of expressing an opinion on the issue. The Government need to work out what they will do in those circumstances beforehand, rather than in a panic afterwards.

Mrs. Laing: Following the hon. Gentleman's heartfelt remarks about what he would do for London transport, he received no support from his hon. Friends around him. It is only fair that I and my hon. Friends should give him a little support. We may not agree with what he wishes to do financially or politically, but we wish him luck in terms of being allowed the freedom of speech that everyone should be allowed in this country to put his views to Londoners.

Mr. Livingstone: I am deeply moved by that intervention. I would have liked to hear a bit more like that when the Conservatives were abolishing the GLC. There was no great desire on the part of the Tory party in 1983 that I should continue to be able to put my interesting views before the British people.

We may yet find that it is Londoners who determine what happens with the issue. I suspect that is why many of the companies involved in negotiations are expressing some doubt and uncertainty. The Labour party needs to work out in advance that if we cannot convince the public, we do not have the right to impose on them something that they specifically reject at the ballot box.

8.49 pm

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): I wish that the Minister of Transport was still here so that I could wish him well him on his appointment. He may have felt that the Ministry of Defence was an obstacle course, but it was as nothing compared with the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions. At this early stage of his career as a Transport Minister, his sense of humour seems not to have forsaken him, and his allegory of a circular firing squad will have caught the imagination of hon. Members.

What caught my imagination, however, was the fact that he, a Scottish Member of Parliament, delivered a committed speech about London Underground. I wonder whether, before very long, when the Scottish Parliament is up and running and able to increase the income tax by 3p in the pound, the voters of London may not feel, with good reason, that the subsidy for Scotland disbursed at present from London and elsewhere south of the border should cease in favour of better investment in public transport and other public services of great importance to Londoners.

At the general election, two issues predominated—health and public transport. Labour spokesmen told us that things could only get better for both, but for my constituents things have only got worse. I shall not stray out of order by talking about the woeful situation facing Harefield and Mount Vernon hospitals, two centres of excellence. However, my constituency has no fewer than eight underground stations: Northwood and Northwood Hills on the Metropolitan line; Ruislip, Ruislip Manor and Eastcote on the Metropolitan and Piccadilly lines; and West Ruislip, Ruislip Gardens and South Ruislip on the Central line.

If there is any problem with London Underground, as there so frequently is—particularly when there is what is euphemistically described as industrial action—my constituents face a real problem in getting to work. I imagine that more than half of them travel to work on the underground. The railways offer no effective alternative. There are only two railway stations to the south of my constituency, at South Ruislip and West Ruislip. Just outside the north of my constituency, at Moor Park, the Chiltern line trains no longer stop. If there is a dispute, or other problems, real difficulties arise.

[Mr. John Wilkinson]

The roads are already hideously congested. One would have imagined that the Government—so committed in their election rhetoric to improving public transport—would have adopted the intelligent approach of improving public transport to encourage people to use it before they clobbered the motorist. In fact, the motorist has been hit by increases in fuel duty well above inflation. If, as Labour plans, the Greater London authority is able to impose charges on motorists going into London, or to impose levies on employers who provide parking spaces, the motorist will be subject to a double whammy.

None of that will clobber those who stay in bed and do not go to work. It will penalise those who make the effort to get to work, or who, as employers, provide opportunities for others to work. This is quite the wrong approach. The Government ought to have improved public transport first to encourage people to use it. They would have had an incentive to do so. Instead, year after year, London Underground fare increases are well above inflation. This year, 4.5 per cent. is the average increase, which is almost double the present rate of inflation.

Many right hon. and hon. Members may have a view of my constituency that derives from "Tropic of Ruislip", by Leslie Thomas, or from the late poet laureate, Sir John Betjeman's vision of "Metroland". It is, perhaps, a vision of genteel tea taken in china cups behind lace curtains and of long, lazy summer evenings playing tennis. The reality is very different. My constituents have a real struggle, financially because the cost of housing in outer London is so high, but above all to get into work.

My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) graphically described the mole-like existence of the London commuter on the underground. Quite honestly, moles have a happier life than many commuters today. At least moles are not jostled and shoved and I think that they have a modicum of certainty about their existence. There is virtually none on London Underground. If the service runs on schedule and there is not some hideous glitch, the commuter regards himself as exceptionally fortunate. This is the exception rather than the rule.

My long-suffering constituents—commuters who are so typical of the many hard-working Londoners—are looking to the Government to find out whether their election rhetoric will bring them a better deal. First, they ask whether the system will be properly financed. There was a debate across the Dispatch Boxes between my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South and the Minister. The right hon. Gentleman took 39 minutes to put his case, which was a bit much in every sense, and the Government amendment ran to 15 lines on the Order Paper.

I thought that the party below the Gangway—the party from south London, which does not have much connection with the tube or anything else—might at least have some academic insight on this subject. However, having listened to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake), we were not much the wiser about the benefits that Liberal policy would bring.

The electors ought to know that, if the tender for the infrastructure of London Underground is not a success, the Government have some alternative in mind. There is no mention of that in their public expenditure provisions.

The Government are against privatisation, so I asked the Minister whether their ideological commitment would be forgotten in the interests of providing funding by that means. I cited the example of the Heathrow link to Paddington. The Minister set his face against it. Our constituents and Londoners can only deduce that the issue will be a hot potato that will land in the lap of the mayor and the Greater London authority. How will it cope? It will have no mechanism to do so other than the imposition of road traffic charges and parking levies for workplaces.

The Government may think that the newly elected authority will take all the blame and face all the odium, but they should remember that they failed to face up to the funding realities, so they will have to carry the political can.

Mr. Brake: On funding realities, does the hon. Gentleman recall that the Conservatives were expecting to get £800 million for a privatised tube system? What would he expect the previous or present Government to achieve with that sum?

Mr. Wilkinson: Sadly, we never had the chance to float London Underground and find out what the market price would be. Londoners are looking not only for enhanced investment, but for the enhanced service that the privatised companies would have supplied. That was another aspect of our policy.

The system must be financed properly and be affordable to users. Although the mayor and the authority should not meddle politically with the management of London Underground, we hope that the body that the mayor will appoint to deal with transport for London will encourage London Transport to be more imaginative in its fares structure. I would not wish London Transport to return to the "fares fair" policy which was instituted by the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone). Although it was well intentioned, it was a financial disaster. Nevertheless, there should be some encouragement for the hard-working Londoner who gets up early and is prepared to go to work before 8 am. Before the rush hour there should be an exceptional discount on fares—an early-bird system. I hope that the mayor will encourage London Underground to introduce just such a scheme.

Mr. Livingstone: In describing the Greater London council's fares policy as disastrous, the hon. Gentleman overlooked one simple fact. Although we cut the fares by roughly 30 per cent., so many more people used the system that we collected 10 per cent. more revenue in fares in real terms, enabling us to cut the rate after just 18 months of the operation of the policy. In my view that it was pretty successful.

Mr. Wilkinson: The difficulty is that the system is already bursting at the seams and there is no spare capacity to cope with the increased throughput which the hon. Gentleman suggests would ensue. That is why I propose a policy directed at the off-peak time before the rush hour with the introduction of early-bird fares.

The Government led Londoners and others to believe that there would be an increase in the network with new lines and the expansion of the system. All those ideas seem to have ground to a complete halt. Perhaps the Government feel too battered and bruised by the Jubilee line experience, so I shall cite three other examples.

First, if the Government have decided that crossrail is dead and that there is no possibility of a high speed east-west link in London, they should say so. It is a matter for the Government to decide. They cannot just pass the buck to the mayor and his authority as the crossrail link would extend far beyond the boundaries of Greater London. The decision to keep the route sacrosanct from development is causing blight, so an early decision is necessary.

My second example is the Croxley link, which would be a modest improvement of potentially immense benefit to my constituents and others in north-west London. It would link the Metropolitan line from Croxley tube station, through Watford high street to Watford Junction railway station. It would represent a modest increase in the system as the track already exists and simply needs to be opened up. I hope that the money will be forthcoming. That is why I pressed the Government to stop the subventions to Scotland when the Scottish Parliament is established in Edinburgh and inject some money here, where it is needed. The Croxley link is just one such example of need. The third example is the Chelsea-Hackney line, which has been anticipated—indeed, eagerly awaited—for some time, but of which there is no sign.

Although the debate is thinly attended and although the Liberals decry it as an annual event and therefore somewhat boring, it is of intense interest to Londoners. They expect the interim period to be used well by Her Majesty's Government and they are not prepared to wait until late summer 2000, when the mayor and his authority enter office: instead, they expect hard decisions to be taken now. They expect the tendering process for the infrastructure to be accelerated and, if it is not to be successfully concluded, they expect the injection of private capital for privatisation.

9.6 pm

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): I represent a constituency containing thousands of people who, like me, travel in and out of London by tube every day. We have all seen the system gradually deteriorate: I remember one occasion when I had to walk from Ladbroke Grove to Euston because a single cable had failed in one part of the system, resulting in the whole system being out of action. That was a direct result of something that the Tories prefer to forget—the running down of investment in the system during the years when they were in office.

The speech made by the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) was a vacuous whine, which served no useful or constructive purpose either in the debate or generally. We know what the Tories' view of the tube is: their solution is privatisation. Privatisation has only ever served one purpose, which is to put taxpayers' and workers' money into the pockets of wealthy shareholders. That is how it has always worked and how it would always work if the Tories were back in government. They have proved that on various occasions, the most glaring example being the privatisation of the railways, not to mention the coal industry privatisation and every other privatisation that they undertook.

I must admit that I have my doubts about the public-private partnership planned by the Labour Government. As my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) pointed out, in its submission to the Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union estimated that, from a 15-year contract and a £7 billion investment, a private contractor would look for a return of between 20 and 25 per cent., or about £1.5 billion. Those figures appear to have been accepted by the Committee.

Mr. Brake: For information, the return required on the Skye bridge was 18.4 per cent.

Mr. Cryer: London Underground could borrow money far more cheaply on the market through a bond issue and I can see no reason why it cannot do so, other than the fact that it might affect the public sector borrowing requirement, which might be a factor. However, the company could successfully borrow the money through an issue of debt on the bond market, which would produce a great influx of capital without the need to resort to hiring private contractors, who would demand a return of about £1.5 billion, which would effectively come out of taxpayers' pockets. What would happen if things went slightly wrong and the contracts overran or targets were not met? I should be interested to know what targets would be set and to what incentives and penalties the private contractors or contractor would be subject when the agreements had been finalised.

There is also the question of employees of London Underground and how they would be affected by the new contracts. New employees taken on by the underground after the PPP comes into effect will not be part of the pension scheme. They might join the pension schemes of some of the big contractors, but it is possible that they will end up working for subcontractors or even sub-subcontractors.

RMT representatives told me only a couple of days ago that some of union members who are former British Rail employees are now working for their sixth employer since 1995. When employees are passed on in that way, it is highly likely that they will end up working for some cowboy who will certainly not run a pension scheme and whose terms and conditions will be rock bottom because he undercut all the other cowboys to get the contract with the original contractor. The RMT also made the point that London Underground management has refused to negotiate on whether there will be compulsory redundancies or on terms and conditions.

The bottom line is that we can raise the investment without resorting to a PPP or any kind of privatisation. We can do it by borrowing on the bond market through an issue of debt. We can do it by increasing taxation. There are many options, but the important thing is that I know from my long experience of travelling through London and from the experiences of my constituents, of many people whom I know and of people in the unions that, if the Government are successful in sorting out transport in London, especially the tube, they will be praised to the rafters. The true path to a better transport system is to be found in the public sector through public investment.

9.11 pm

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): The hon. Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) will recall that I was present when he made

[Mr. Peter Brooke]

his maiden speech. I am delighted to follow him on this occasion and I congratulate him on the questioning nature of his speech.

When the Minister spoke in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway), he said that this was the third debate that the official Opposition had asked for on this subject. When the Deputy Prime Minister made his statement on the London underground, I asked whether, given the complexities that we were being asked to absorb in the brief space of a statement, it would be possible shortly after to have a debate in Government time. I say willingly that the Deputy Prime Minister was not unsympathetic to that idea, although he produced the disclaimer that the matter was not wholly in his hands. It is the official Opposition who have called this third debate and I am delighted that they have done so.

Politicians are divided into healers and warriors. I do not think that even my worst enemy would put me in a category other than the healers. In our first debate on the London underground, to an extent that even my Front-Bench colleagues probably thought was eccentric and idiosyncratic, I offered London Labour Members an olive branch of common cause. It was on that occasion flatly rejected in speeches of assault on the previous Government's record. The same blame for their record has been evinced tonight. I misquote deliberately, in order to avoid personalising the issue, "Methinks they do protest too much."

Both the Government amendment, the length of which was worthy of the length of the tube network without the benefit of a Frank Pick map, and the aggressiveness of the response from Opposition Members, were coloured occasionally by recall of that vignette of a Latin American delegate at the United Nations, in the margin of whose speech were marked the words "Weak point—shout." Certainly between them they revealed a Government on the defensive, by which I was not surprised.

That said, I salute and give credit to the Minister for one statement in the early part of his speech. He said that Londoners were interested in seeing the problems of London underground faced up to. He had a good crack about there being no references to passengers in the five-line motion tabled by the official Opposition. However, the one reference to passengers in the Government's 15-line amendment did not exactly overdo passenger concern. The Minister discreetly omitted from his speech any reference to the criticisms by the Transport Sub-Committee of the Select Committee of what the Government were about.

As a Londoner, I agree that the Underground has been under siege under Governments of both colours and Greater London councils of both colours. My recollection of the relief of Lucknow is that the first sign of it was a skirl of bagpipes to the tune of "The Campbells are Coming." Londoners might be forgiven if on this occasion they thought that not all the Campbells would necessarily be welcome or of help if media presentation took precedence over solid improvement.

In such presentation as we received today, no reference was made to the Chelsea-Hackney line, phase 2 of the channel tunnel rail link or advanced construction of the new Thameslink station at St. Pancras, let alone crossrail. That silence is not what Londoners expected of new Labour, and on Thameslink 2000 that silence is steadily lengthening.

What do third parties—I refer to those in London, not to those in the House—think of the position? The London chamber of commerce and industry said that the Government have a "can't do mentality". That is very new Labour. It says that 70 per cent. of businesses would oppose road user charges and workplace parking levies if revenues were not fully invested in improving public transport.

London First, to which the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) referred, had a powerful influence on the previous election result in London through its canvassing on the London underground during the campaign, so it is no particular friend of the official Opposition. It has identified 20 transport actions that need to be taken before the setting up of the Greater London authority and 10 new powers that must be given to the authority. When the Minister for Transport in London winds up the debate, it will be interesting to hear how many of those proposals the Government are prepared to accept.

London First also reported that 51 per cent. of respondents in its business survey said that the underground was the most important transport issue for the Greater London authority, against 38 per cent. who said that road congestion was most important.

What about the Government's response, as demonstrated this evening? The reference to the £1.2 billion deficit on infrastructure, which I acknowledge—the figure is agreed throughout the Chamber—gave no credit to the fact that it is much less than half the deficit that the previous Government inherited from the Greater London council. The Minister of Transport claims that the Government have made a start, but he should also acknowledge the progress made by the previous Government, which has been recognised in my constructive conversations with London Transport management.

I am delighted to see the Minister return to the Chamber. I apologise for having referred to him in his absence. He did not refer to the fact that London underground fares are heading in the opposite direction to privatised rail fares. He made no reference to the article by Simon Jenkins, which my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) quoted, or the astronomical charges that the Treasury is thought to be insisting that bidders should pay for access to the network. We were not told how far the absence of a survey for the infrastructure of the underground may be adding to the risks with which bidders are having to cope. The Opposition and those bidders have no idea what uncompetitive work practices the RMT may insist on.

Campbells may be coming—I treat the Minister with good will—but the terrain over which they are advancing remains unpromising. Londoners using the system need, above all, long-term stable policies. It is the task of the official Opposition to continue to man the ramparts of Lucknow. If that means a fourth debate, a fifth debate and a sixth debate, so be it. We shall know that relief is on the way when at last we have a debate in Government time.

9.18 pm

Mr. Clive Efford (Eltham): My right hon. Friend the Minister of Transport referred in his opening remarks to the fact that the word "passengers" does not appear in the Conservative motion. He should know that the previous Government gave up using the term "passengers" because it gave the travelling public the impression that they intended to take them somewhere.

As somebody who worked in London's transport system for nearly 12 years, I witnessed the ravages inflicted on that transport by the previous Government. In an attempt to be brief and allow other hon. Members to speak, I shall not respond to the remarks of the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) or cite the catalogue of errors and attacks on public transport made by the previous Government.

I represent a constituency in south-east London and I know that public transport has to be treated as a public service that will always require funding from public money. Leaving it to the ravages of the private sector does not allow it to meet the various needs of the community. Many public transport services are essential but not profitable. Public subsidy will always be required, so public accountability will be necessary.

We have to start to plan, and to make the word "integrated" mean something if we are to tackle the economic environmental problems in London. We have to integrate trains, buses, the tube and the road network. I welcome the measure in the Greater London Authority Bill to combine responsibility for roads and other modes of transport because, for far too long, that lack of integration has been an obstacle to an effective plan for London's overall transport system.

London's traffic is likely to increase by 2 to 11 per cent. by 2000, by 8 to 21 per cent. by 2011, and by 22 to 59 per cent. by 2031. That points to serious problems for the economy and for people's health in London. We need to start addressing those problems, and we need to start now. With all due respect to the Liberal Democrats, we cannot wait to plan until the GLA is in place.

Mr. Brake *rose—*

Mr. Efford: There is very little time left, and I know that other hon. Members want to speak. The hon. Gentleman has had plenty to say this evening.

Network SouthEast, which serves my constituency, is already running at capacity. There is very little scope for increasing that capacity at peak times, although investment in longer carriages and platforms may result in some improvement. Five of the operating companies are operating in excess of capacity—they carry many persons in excess of capacity every day—and, as I said, south-east London has no tube network.

Investment in London Underground, via the Jubilee line and other schemes, is planned to increase capacity outside of peak times by 25 per cent. by 2002 or 2003, but it is going to take a great deal longer to increase capacity at peak times. There is the potential for a further 20 per cent. increase, according to London Underground's own figures.

The bus is not seen as a suitable alternative by people travelling to London from my constituency or, for that matter, by those travelling through my constituency. People use their cars out of choice. A recent survey in the *Evening Standard* demonstrated that even a cut in the cost of travelling by public transport would not result in people choosing to give up their cars, so we have to make public transport extremely attractive.

Derek Turner, the Traffic Director for London, was quoted last week in the *Evening Standard* as saying that we have to take a carrot and stick approach. I very much agree with that. Bus lanes will take out sections of the road but will then offer an opportunity for people to travel more quickly by bus. He regards the bus as being the only solution to the problem of excess demand for transport over the next five years. That is not true in all cases, but in south-east London, where there is no underground network, we certainly need to find other ways to expand our links to the underground.

We have the prospect of road pricing in London, which will fund investment in public transport networks. If people in south-east London are contributing through road pricing to investment in public transport, it is only right that that investment goes into modes of transport that will benefit them in the absence of the underground in their area. I hope that the Minister will take that point on board.

I have stressed the fact many times in the House that there is no underground network in south-east London. Other than the bus network and the over-subscribed Network SouthEast, there are no alternatives to the car for people travelling to central London. Unless we use our road network and turn sections of our roads over to guided bus links or other modes of transport of that sort, we shall have difficulty in getting people out of their cars and on to public transport in south-east London.

Let us consider the cost of extending rail links. The Jubilee line costs £172.5 million per km, and the Croydon tramlink costs £7.1 million per km. Guided bus links are considerably cheaper than that. The schemes in cities such as Ipswich and Leeds have succeeded in bringing people on to those forms of transport. The March edition of *Local Transport Today* contains articles about those schemes. Surveys demonstrate that few new journeys are made as a result of the schemes, but that significant numbers of people switch from their cars to public transport. That is the way forward for London.

My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister said that he wanted the bus to become a racehorse, not a workhorse. I echo that. We must change people's attitudes to buses and other forms of public transport. We must improve links between existing modes of transport. People should view switching from a bus to the underground, or from a bus to the rail network, no differently from the way in which someone travelling on the London underground views changing from the Bakerloo line, for example, to the Central line.

By changing people's attitudes to public transport, we can start to address the growing problem of traffic levels in London. That would help to address the problems that my constituents face daily, with two of London's major arterial routes dissecting my constituency. I welcome the opening remarks of my hon. Friend the Minister of Transport, and I hope that in her summing up, my hon. Friend the Minister for Transport in London will take my comments on board.

9.26 pm

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): Labour and Liberal Members are wrong to suggest, as they have been doing all evening, that Conservative Members of Parliament do not care about standards on the underground. We do. We all want the best possible service for the passengers on the London underground.

I care particularly because the underground is extremely important to those who live in my constituency. However, I was pleased to hear the Minister say—I entirely agree with him—that the underground is also important because London is the capital city, not just of England, but of the United Kingdom. That is why hon. Members in all parts of the House and people in all parts of the country should care about London Underground.

Before the election, the Government made promises, as they did on many subjects, that they would wave a magic wand and make the underground, like many other parts of our national life, better. However, they have done nothing about it. They have been delaying all this time. I should point out to Ministers that, when our party was in government, we privatised the entire British Rail network in 18 months—*[Interruption.]* Hon. Members should not say that we did it wrongly. We did not.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton) *rose—*

Mrs. Laing: No, I shall not give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Those who have scrutinised the financial affairs of British Rail and the way in which it was privatised have criticised certain aspects of it, but not the whole of it. Hon. Members should think what British Rail was like before we privatised it, and imagine how much worse the railway would be now, if it did not have the benefit of private sector investment.

Labour Members and Ministers know that the only way to get the capital that is needed for London Underground is to privatise it, but they are so full of dogmatic ideas against privatisation, sim[illegible]use it was such a great success for the Governme[illegible] Margaret Thatcher and of my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major).

Mr. Love: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. According to the recent National Audit Office report on the privatisation of Railtrack, the public purse lost between £600 million and £1.4 billion in that privatisation. It should not be forgotten that the National Audit Office is an extremely conservative body. That money could have been used to improve London underground.

Mrs. Laing: The hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well—the National Audit Office acknowledged this—that privatisation of the railways was conducted in the best possible way at the time, and that the best possible financial and professional advice was accepted and acted on. If we knew in advance what would happen, we would all be rich from playing the markets because we would know where to invest.

Mr. Love: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Laing: No, I do not have time to give way again. The hon. Gentleman knows what point I am making, and he knows that I am right. The railways would be very much worse if they had not had the benefit of privatisation.

Ministers have the problem of a rose by any other name smelling as sweet. They know that they want a privatised underground, but they do not want to privatise it because that is a successful Conservative policy which they cannot bear to acknowledge. In trying to give the rose some other name, they have created this PPP thing—public-private partnership—which simply delays matters. The people of London and of the United Kingdom as a whole would benefit far more if Ministers admitted what must be done and privatised the underground.

For the sake of time, I shall not go into all the detail as I might otherwise have done. I shall concentrate on one important point pertaining especially to my constituency, which is outwith the area to be covered by the proposed Greater London authority, and therefore outwith the area for which the mayor of London will have responsibility. The Minister for Transport in London has politely listened to me making this point before in a different way. I should like to ask her questions on a slightly different aspect of the same point.

After the Greater London authority assumes responsibility for the London underground and the mayor of London becomes accountable to the people of London for its running, who will be responsible to my constituents? Of whom will I be able to ask questions about the underground on behalf of my constituents? They will not have a vote for the mayor of London. If anybody standing for the post of mayor of London had to consider in which part of the underground they would invest and which part they would neglect, would not they propose investment in parts where people were able to vote for them, and neglect the parts for which they would not be responsible?

The Minister has patiently listened to that important point before. I hope that she has done so again. I am looking for assurances on behalf of my constituents that I will be able to continue to ask questions of Transport Ministers in the House about the underground once the mayor of London assumes responsibility for it. [HON. MEMBERS: "There he is."] We might hope that my hon. Friends are right in referring to the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone), who has just entered the Chamber. We certainly hope that the hon. Gentleman has a chance to put himself forward if he so wishes, and that the control freaks in his party allow him free speech.

We on the Conservative Benches care about the London underground. I certainly do because it is of prime importance to my constituents. I sincerely hope that the Government will stop shilly-shallying, delaying and depending on their dogmatic principles, and start thinking about what is best for the people who depend on the underground, and get on with the privatisation process as soon as possible.

9.34 pm

Mr. Keith Darvill (Upminster): Upminster is, of course, at the beginning of the District line. Many thousands of my constituents travel on the London underground each day, and many work at the Cranham depot, which supports the District line. Apart from education and health, I think that transport is the most important issue to Londoners. It is just as important to visitors to London, 90 per cent. of whom use the tube when visiting the capital.

There is no doubt that, if any Government failed to tackle the issues of investment and improvement in the underground, they would ultimately fail to secure the support of Londoners. Londoners know that the Conservative party failed miserably in office, and that is one of the many reasons why it remains so unpopular.

In many ways, the underground epitomises good public investment in infrastructure. It is a perfect example of how public investment can help the nation to prosper. What would London have been if that investment had not taken place? Each time that we travel on the underground, we are receiving a dividend from that past investment. I first used the underground in the early 1950s, to travel into central London from Leytonstone on the Central line. People were amazed at the frequency of the service and moved into that part of London because of the quality of that service.

Unfortunately, in the second half of this century, investment has not kept pace with need. If the post-King's Cross disaster investment and the much-belated Jubilee line extension investment are stripped out, the underlying investment over those 18 years has been miserable. Conservative Members should be ashamed at the wording of their motion, and, of course, of their management of the underground over 18 years.

London cannot flourish without higher levels of investment in public transport. In the global economy, cities across the world compete with each other, and our businesses cannot afford to have transport system infrastructure that receives no investment. It is astonishing that London has done so well, despite the decline in investment. However, we all know that the system is cracking under the strain and it will not provide anything like the level of service required without higher, and sustainable, levels of investment.

The recently published "Four World Cities Transport Study" compared four metropolises: London, Paris, New York and Tokyo. It contains lots of interesting statistics, but of most interest to me was the information contrasting Tokyo with London. In London, 64 per cent. of journeys are made by car from Monday to Friday; the figure for Tokyo is 27 per cent. In London, 19 per cent. of journeys are made on the railways and by underground; the figure for Tokyo is 38 per cent.

The study sets out many standards of reliability and punctuality: 98 per cent. of Tokyo's metro trains arrive within a minute of their scheduled time; in London, only 85 per cent. arrive within five minutes of scheduled time. London needs to address its punctuality record.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) will no doubt welcome the study's recommendation on fares. It suggests that London and New York could consider reducing high public transport fares, thus making public transport more affordable.

The Opposition motion makes no mention of their involvement in the decline in investment; no mention of their legacy; no mention of the inheritance that they left to this Government; and no mention of their role in the delayed start for the Jubilee line extension. For those reasons, their motion should be rejected.

9.38 pm

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): We have had an interesting debate, but perhaps its most salient feature is that not a single speaker—apart from the Minister of Transport—defended the proposal for a public-private partnership.

I, however, intend to follow the example of my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) and will attempt to be a healer in this debate. That means that we must put behind us language such as that used by the hon. Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford), who talked of leaving the system to the "ravages" of the private sector. That is an unfair charge to make. *[Interruption.]* The Minister of Transport did not use that phrase; the hon. Member for Eltham accused him of leaving the system to the "ravages" of the private sector.

We must move ahead and begin with what the Labour party said at the election, which has certainly raised expectations about what it would deliver. I appreciate that the Minister of Transport did not read the London manifesto, because he was standing elsewhere, but it said:

"Londoners want a clean, efficient, safe and reliable transport system to get them where they want when they want."

We can all agree with that, and we should start from the premise that we all have Londoners' interests close to our hearts and want to improve the system.

The manifesto went on to say:

"In future, the Greater London Authority, elected by Londoners, will appoint the Board which runs London Transport."

That has changed; it will not happen for some time.

Much criticism was levelled at our privatisation proposals. The manifesto was, perhaps, being ironic in stating:

"Much-needed investment would be delayed."

At present, it seems that the public-private sector partnership is leading to the delay of much-needed investment in the underground. Perhaps more extraordinarily, Labour is wedded to the dogma of public ownership

"to safeguard its commitment to the public interest and guarantee value for money to taxpayers and passengers."

If public accountability had guaranteed value for money and the public interest, we would never have needed to transfer any of the state-owned interests to the private sector. The Labour party has now embraced the practical benefits of privatisation in industry after industry. It has even decided to reverse its position on, for instance, the national air traffic control service, which is now to be privatised.

Dr. Reid: No.

Mr. Jenkin: The right hon. Gentleman is unwise to say that. He told the Select Committee that it was privatisation. Of course, he corrected himself quickly, because it is not linguistically politically correct to use the term "privatisation"; but, if selling 51 per cent. of a business is not privatisation, we did not privatise British Telecom until well after 1984, when we sold 51 per cent. of it. I seem to remember that the right hon. Gentleman opposed that at the time, although he did not know then that a public-private sector partnership was involved.

We need to put aside dogma. We also need to understand that, if we had waited for public support before doing the necessary things, we would not have privatised a single industry. The right hon. Gentleman's party made sure that the public were against us on every one of those privatisations.

[Mr. Jenkin]

Let us compare and contrast the privatised railway with the London underground, which is under state control and enjoying that public accountability and responsiveness to the public interest. At least the privatised railway has an investment programme of £17 billion for Railtrack, and huge new sums for rolling stock. Regulated fares are falling against the rate of inflation, and there have been substantial improvements in performance since privatisation. I think that even the right hon. Gentleman would accept that. The figures have been produced by Railtrack, and are not disputed by his Department.

There is still virtually no investment in London Underground, which is under state control. Fares are rising at well over the rate of inflation, and the service is falling to pieces. Where would the right hon. Gentleman have got £17 billion for rail infrastructure investment if the railways had not been privatised by the last Conservative Government?

New Labour opposed the investment that is now being made in the railways. That is the logic of the position taken by the right hon. Gentleman's party, as my hon. Friend the Member for Epping Forest (Mrs. Laing) so ably demonstrated. It now opposes the same sort of investment in the London underground. It is worth recalling what our policy for the underground was when we were in government. We made 10 commitments. Safety was a top priority; other commitments were to integrated through ticketing, the retention of travelcards, the retention of concessionary fares, shares for employees and passengers enabling them to acquire a real stake in the business, the protection of travel concessions and pensions, guaranteed levels of service, safeguards to keep stations open, controls on fares so that they did not increase above the rate of inflation as they have under the present Government, and, of course, investment. We said that investment should be a priority. As my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) said earlier, we were planning a privatised underground with reinvestment of at least £750 million a year.

Mr. Gapes: If its transport policy was so good, why has the Conservative party, which used to have a huge number of seats in London, been decimated in the capital?

Mr. Jenkin: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has asked that question, because it enables me to say that, had we privatised the system 10 years ago, the benefits of privatisation would have been felt. British Airways is now the world's leading airline; perhaps London Underground would now have been the world's leading underground system.

State ownership does not give public accountability. Under state control, passengers are the last priority. I represent North Essex. My constituents commute to London and use the underground, which is more than can be said for the right hon. Member for Hamilton, North and Bellshill (Dr. Reid). Passengers, who are first and foremost in our mind, are helpless under state ownership. They are herded around like cattle. Their complaints are ignored. The state-owned service is a take-it-or-leave-it service for passengers.

I counsel the Minister of Transport to be cautious about the benefits of changing the management. We changed the management often for London Underground, but the same fundamental problems remain. A state-owned industry, particularly a state-owned monopoly, is run in the interests of producers, not passengers. What is needed is a step-change in the culture and values of the management and staff of London Underground, an infusion of finance, and the discipline and values of the private sector. If that is what his public-private partnership is intended to achieve, bravo, we shall be the first to cheer him on, but, unfortunately, it does not look as though his PPP will deliver those benefits.

Passengers are at the heart of the debate. We did not do enough for the tube—I would be the first to acknowledge that—but the Government's policy means that they are doing even less for the tube because the investment that we were promising has been choked off. The cancellation of Conservative plans means the cancellation of the investment plans that would have flowed through to the benefit of passengers.

Mr. Martin Linton (Battersea): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Jenkin: I will not give way. I have little time.

What exactly are the Government's proposals? What does public-private partnership actually mean? It is a "have your cake and eat it" proposal. The problem is that the Government want the advantages and benefits of private capital, without any of the disciplines and loss of control that goes with transfer of ownership. The hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) is right: the policy is an expensive way in which to run a nationalised industry.

Having decided to go ahead, the Government published their proposals in March last year. Around 20 credible bidders have emerged, but the key issues all concern the uncertainty of the process. In August, the Government effectively asked bidders, "How on earth shall we manage the process?" They will not say when the deadlines are to be. They will not say when the public-private partnership is to happen. It is expensive to bid: it costs each bidder about £20 million. With no certainty of success, it is likely that some of the bidders will fall by the wayside: they will not put up the capital on a purely speculative basis when there is so much uncertainty.

There is a widespread feeling that one bidder is in a privileged position and that the process will be a shoe-in for Railtrack. I think it would be helpful if the Minister for Transport in London made it clear, particularly as there are no financial deadlines, that Railtrack is not getting privileged access because of its special relationship with the Government in view of the utility that it currently runs.

It is a little vain of the Government to protest that they are not negotiating against a deadline. What gives the lie to that is a written answer by the Deputy Prime Minister. It shows the outcome of the public spending review and confirms that the figure for London Transport

"includes no provision for London Underground from 2000-01, from when a PPP is planned to be in place."—[*Official Report*, 20 July 1998; Vol. 316, c. 379.]

There is a deadline for the PPP. The Government are busy advertising that they are not negotiating against a deadline because they are terrified of the consequences of reaching that deadline without a PPP in place.

Therefore, will the Minister for Transport in London confirm that the pre-qualification will take place in March or April this year, that there will formal invitations to tender by August and that we will have a PPP in place in 2000? Otherwise, the best-value process is nothing but a delay to the investment that the underground badly needs.

What will the subsidy regime be under the public-private partnership? Is there going to be a subsidy? Does the Minister seriously think that it will be possible to run London Underground without a public subsidy, unlike any other public metro system in the world and differently from the way in which we privatised the railway? *[Interruption.]*

I hope that we will put aside all the past dogmas. The politics of the cold war should be over and the tube should not be the plaything of politicians. There should be a third way—a way of consensus and co-operation for the benefit of Londoners. That third way will not be found if we stick doggedly to the old religion of public ownership and control where there is only one customer—the politicians.

9.51 pm

The Minister for Transport in London (Ms Glenda Jackson): I am rather sorry that the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) was urged to sit down by my hon. Friends because he has clearly been converted to the third way, which is inherent within the Labour Government. I had a strong feeling that, if he had been allowed to linger a little longer at the Dispatch Box, he might even have walked across and joined us to confirm that he has accepted what the Labour party has been arguing for a considerable time, which is that there is a third way to tackle the basic and truly important issue of how we provide a first-class public transport system in London. As the Minister of Transport said, the London Underground provides the arteries for this great city.

The Opposition must be regretting their choice of this topic for what is undoubtedly an opportunistic debate. Their amendment does not even mention the word "passenger". Despite the assiduous efforts of the Conservative Whips, only three Opposition Members were found to speak and sit on their Benches for the majority of the debate. The work of the Whips is still going on, and I can now see more Conservative Members in the Chamber, but only as the debate is drawing to a close. Their presence debunks, as powerfully as did my right hon. Friend the Minister, the somewhat pathetic claims by the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) that they wanted to debate this issue because they are concerned for the vulnerable people of London.

The hon. Member for Croydon, South attempted to condemn a public-private partnership and demanded to know, as did the hon. Member for North Essex, the timetable for PPP. As my right hon. Friend the Minister said, he would dearly love to play poker with the hon. Member for Croydon, South. The inability to hide one's hand seems to be shared by all Conservative transport spokesmen. The hon. Gentleman ignored the realities that would have resulted from the Conservative Government's proposal for privatisation of the underground. He also ignored the deeply seated opposition felt by Londoners for those proposals.

I must tell the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Mrs. Laing) that rail privatisation took a great deal longer than 18 months. I believe that it took almost four years. The previous Government said that privatisation of the underground would take at least four years. The costs of rail privatisation were astronomic and many of my hon. Friends have given the figures involved. Privatisation of the underground, which had been proposed by the previous Administration, would have had to be subsidised from the public purse for a considerable time, as has been the case for rail privatisation.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Jackson: Regretfully, I have very little time.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) also talked about the timetabling for PPP. He is someone else who does not know how to play poker. My right hon. Friend the Minister dubbed the hon. Member for Croydon, South's inability to understand how to hide one's cards when one is in—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Hughes: Give way now.

Ms Jackson: I would give way if the hon. Gentleman had asked more quietly and had not waved his arms, but I did not believe the request—he overplayed it somewhat.

My right hon. Friend the Minister of Transport said that had the hon. Member for Croydon, South been in charge of a firing squad, he would have put it in a circle. Had the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington been in charge of a firing squad, not only would he have asked it to stand in a circle, he would have asked the condemned men to hold the rifles.

Mr. Ottaway: The Minister of Transport talked about a firing squad in a circle and his willingness to play poker with me because he did not want to be up against a deadline. Does the Minister agree that the workers on the Jubilee line are working to the ultimate deadline?

Ms Jackson: The ultimate deadline in 1 January 2000. We have consistently said that the three phases of the Jubilee line extension will deliver the line on time.

There is little doubt from their remarks about the Jubilee line extension this evening that the Conservatives are not just uncommitted to this excellent example of what is best in British civil engineering, delivering a wonderful service to the capital city, but are looking for it to fail. Let the record show that, in this area, as in so many others, the official Opposition are busy talking the country down.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) suggested that the RMT was not happy with the public-private partnership. It argued strongly to my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister that such a system should be used on the Tyne and Wear metro. The PPP has certainly not slipped back.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) raised justifiable concerns about London Underground staff in relation to the PPP. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has written to all members of the union assuring them that there will be no change in their terms and conditions of service. They will be able to be members of the pension scheme. Only last week, he met union representatives to discuss their concerns and reassure them about what is being proposed.

[Ms Jackson]

The right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) gave one of his usual fascinating contributions. However, we are talking about modernising. I was rather nonplussed by his analogies involving Lucknow—part of an empire that this nation has long since lost—and relief. I was expecting the word Mafeking to appear. I have no doubt that he will use such an analogy on another occasion.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford) highlighted the need for an integrated transport system. He reminded us that, despite 18 years of Conservative rule, there are no underground services running south of the river. We believe that our creation of a mayor and assembly, with an overarching policy for integrating transport in London, will have a major part to play.

I must point out to my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East, and the hon. Members for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) and for Carshalton and Wallington that the creation of a PPP—a Government policy that the Government will complete—will not leave the mayor and assembly in a position to throw up their hands and say "Not me, guv" or regard the issue as a hot potato, because they will be responsible for delivering the services.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 130, Noes 335.

Division No. 50] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Stephen Day and
Mrs. Caroline Spelman.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Allan, Richard
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Austin, John
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Caborn, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dafis, Cynog
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet

Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Gorrie, Donald
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McLeish, Henry
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Willis, Phil
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Kevin Hughes and
Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 290, Noes 159.

Division No. 51] **[10.13 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beggs, Roy
Bennett, Andrew F
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*

Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Burden, Richard
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cabom, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
McLeish, Henry
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Malleber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrolw W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Kevin Hughes and
Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

NOES

Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*

Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Oaten, Mark
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Stephen Day and
Mrs. Caroline Spelman.

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House notes that the Government inherited a substantial investment backlog in London Underground and that this backlog arose from the previous Government's ideological antipathy to public expenditure and unwillingness to seek genuine and viable partnership between the public and private sectors; welcomes the Government's rejection of the Conservatives' policy of wholesale privatisation and applauds it for its thoroughgoing investigation of a public-private partnership as a means to secure necessary investment funds; notes that by providing additional funding of £365 million and that by bringing forward two Private Finance Initiative deals on ticketing and the power distribution system, the Government has already ensured that the Underground will benefit from around £1 billion of investment over the next two years; and is confident that the present Government's approach to London Underground will secure value for money for passengers and the taxpayer and give Londoners an underground system which meets their needs, is fast, reliable, comfortable and worthy of such a great capital city.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That the Business of the House Order of 25th January shall apply also to the Motion in the name of Mr. Secretary Darling relating to the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating (No. 2) Order 1999 tabled on 26th January.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(4) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

HALLMARKING

That the Hallmarking (Hallmarking Act Amendment) Regulations 1998 (S.I., 1998, No. 2978) be referred to a Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Question agreed to.

Local Government Ombudsman (Wales)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

10.24 pm

Mr. Don Touhig (Islwyn): I very much regret that I have had to ask for this debate. I did so because of what I believe is the indifferent response of the local government ombudsman in Wales to a serious matter that I have raised with him. Before becoming a Member of Parliament, I spent 20 years serving as a councillor, and I hold strongly to the view that local councils must be accountable for their actions. More than that, they must be seen to be accountable and they must act in an open and transparent manner. That is the only way to retain public confidence and appreciation of the valuable services provided by local councils, and the only way in which local councils can gain respect for the decisions they take.

The public must have confidence in the Commissioner for Local Administration in Wales, more commonly known as the ombudsman. As we all know, the ombudsman has a crucial role: he has the task of policing local councils and ensuring that any complaints made against a council by the public are properly investigated. I know from experience the extreme frustration felt by any individual who thinks that he or she cannot obtain a fair and impartial investigation after arriving at the belief that the local council has acted improperly. That is why individuals who have a grievance against their local council often look to the ombudsman for justice.

On the whole, the ombudsman does a good job and provides an essential public service. I will go so far as to say that I should not be opposed to the ombudsman being given even greater powers to ensure that a local council found guilty of maladministration is made to change its ways. Having said that, I regret having to express my anger and disappointment at the ombudsman, following an investigation into a complaint made against Caerphilly county borough council last year.

On 10 August 1998, the ombudsman published a report after investigating a complaint made against the council following its decision to refuse a planning application. In his report, the ombudsman concluded that the council was guilty of maladministration, because one of its members, at a meeting of the planning committee, had failed to declare an interest—that he was a friend of the principal person opposing that planning application. By not declaring an interest in the matter when it came before the planning committee, it was said by the person who called in the ombudsman to investigate the complaint, the councillor in question had influenced the committee to refuse the planning application. I add, less in mitigation than to put the fact on the record, that the appeal against the council's decision to refuse the planning application, which went to the Welsh Office, was eventually turned down.

Although only one councillor was cited in the original complaint upheld by the ombudsman, the ombudsman went on to name three other councillors on the grounds that they were members of the same local Labour party branch as the person who had opposed the planning application in the first place. I have no criticism to make of the ombudsman's decision, in so far as he was satisfied that the four councillors were in breach of the national code of local government conduct as it relates to members declaring an interest: they knew the person who opposed the planning application. Indeed, the ombudsman commented that he had a statutory duty to name the councillors involved and I do not challenge that, because the House decided to give the ombudsman that responsibility, so he is right to carry it out.

My concern is that, in his report, the ombudsman made the following statement:

"the decision to refuse the planning application was instigated by the local councillors in a private meeting".

Let me stress, there was no private meeting of councillors. The report was wrong, and the ombudsman was wrong. Caerphilly county borough council's monitoring officer, who is the person charged with providing the ombudsman with the information necessary to draw up his report, made the following statement:

"the decision to refuse the planning application was instigated by local councillors at a previous meeting".

That was a "previous" meeting of the planning committee, not a "private" meeting.

Despite being given the opportunity to correct the error, the ombudsman declined. The error was the reason for the following comment that the ombudsman made when he censured the council:

"It is of course quite natural and reasonable for councillors to discuss in private, issues due to be considered by the Council at a formal meeting.

What is not acceptable, however, is for decisions on a planning application to be made prematurely in private by a small group of local councillors before the material issues have been fully considered by the appropriate committee and the arguments for and against a particular course of action have been fully aired. Such a process is unacceptable."

Let me stress that there was no private meeting of a small group of councillors. It never ever took place.

The serious inaccuracy was queried with the ombudsman in a letter from the council dated 28 July last year containing its comment on his draft report. I have the letter here. On page 17, paragraph 3 the ombudsman was asked the specific question:

"Could you please explain the reference to a private meeting".

The ombudsman replied on 31 July with a two-sentence letter that did not even acknowledge the question from the council. What is the point of circulating a draft report on a complaint against a council to the council, its officers and so on and then ignoring the comments on that draft report?

Despite being made aware of this considerable error, on which he based a substantial part of his criticism of the councillors, the ombudsman made no attempt to correct it. As a result of the inaccuracy, the councillors involved were the subject of newspaper stories and banner headlines which questioned their integrity and brought each of them into grave disrepute. There were headlines such as "Councillors rapped by ombudsman". The story said that the ombudsman criticised the councillors for meeting in private and predetermining the planning application. Another story was headed "Councillor: I acted improperly", and made more references to private meetings on planning matters. Another headline was "Councillors were wrong." Again, the story contained references to the councillors holding a "private", not a "previous", meeting of the planning committee. Another

story with the headline "Rapped over the knuckles" contained further references to the councillors holding private meetings. Such meetings never took place.

I stress that I do not challenge the core conclusion reached by the ombudsman in his report. He investigated and reached his conclusions and I do not challenge them at all. I do challenge his arrogance in failing to correct a blatant and serious error in the report. More than that, I am advised that he later refused to alter the report or reissue it. He simply offered a perfunctory apology to the councillors involved, saying that a typographical error had been made. How many times have we heard the poor old typist blamed for getting it wrong?

It cannot be right to base a report's conclusion, even in part, on a typing error and not issue an amended report. Stating that there were private meetings when there were none and linking the term "private meeting" to the main findings of the report had serious consequences for the councillors and the local authority.

The suggestion that the councillors met in secret to predetermine a planning decision has had an appalling impact on the public perception of the council in general and the councillors in particular. They live in a small valley community where everyone knows everyone else. I know the councillors well. They have told me that in the churches, chapels, shops, pubs and clubs, they have all been subjected to the odd remark. People say, "What do you think about councillors having these private meetings to predetermine planning matters?" A private meeting never took place. The councillors have had their good names taken away from them without justification. I know them; they are decent people who have given years of public service.

Like all Members of the House, everyone in public life can expect to take knocks from time to time, but no public official has the right to damage another public servant's reputation unjustly. I have no criticism of the press reports of the matter. The press reported what the ombudsman had put in his report. What is at issue is the councillors' integrity and the truth of the report.

The impression remains even today that the councillors met in private to determine the planning application before it was considered by the appropriate committee. It is a matter of record that all the comments made by the councillors named in the report were made in public at open meetings that were attended by the press and members of the public. The failure of the ombudsman to correct such an evident wrong has affected public confidence in the councillors and the council. That is most unjust.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, by and large, the ombudsman seems to be a reliable point of contact for people with complaints? Does he agree that, above all, it is absolutely vital that the ombudsman be seen to have an impeccable record of scrutiny and scrupulous decision-making because he or she is the last point of call for those who have a complaint about a local authority decision?

Mr. Touhig: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I have made that point. I subscribe to the ombudsman's role, but in this case he has acted unjustly. Surely his role is to serve justice, not to create an injustice, which is what he has done in this instance.

Had the ombudsman corrected the error, I would not be raising the matter tonight. At no stage has he shown a willingness to correct the error. He is not prepared to publish a new report. He did not correct the error when the council's head of legal services wrote to him querying the reference to the private meeting. In fact, when he replied, he dismissed the error as if it were a peripheral matter, and he has not corrected it since.

I appreciate that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary has limited powers with which to deal with the ombudsman, who must be seen to be distanced from the Government as well as local government, but perhaps he might ask the ombudsman in for a cup of tea and a chat and point out to him that there is an evident injustice in this case which he needs to put right. He should not be allowed to make such a serious error without redress. I am certain that, if the shoe were on the other foot and the ombudsman were investigating a similar error by a local council, he would have plenty to say, and rightly so.

The ombudsman is a public servant responsible for upholding the rights of individuals to complain against the actions of local government by investigating those complaints and making a judgment. However, the ombudsman needs to be told that he does not truly enhance justice and fair play or the rights of the individual making the complaint if he infringes, indeed ignores, the rights of those being investigated and delivers an injustice to them.

If we are to retain confidence in the ombudsman as an individual and in the office that he occupies, he must not be seen to be beyond criticism. Like the councils that he investigates, he makes judgments and if he gets them wrong, he has a duty to put them right.

10.37 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Jon Owen Jones): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig) for raising the important issue of the local government ombudsman.

Before answering the specific points that my hon. Friend has made, I should like to put on record my appreciation of the sterling work that the local government ombudsman and his staff have done and are doing in policing local government in Wales. He has responsibility for investigating allegations of maladministration involving injustice, and last year received more than 1,048 new complaints.

My hon. Friend's concern arises from the ombudsman's investigation into Caerphilly county borough council. In August, the ombudsman issued a report naming four Caerphilly councillors for their non-disclosure of private and personal non-pecuniary interests when they spoke against a planning application for the extension of a dwelling at meetings of the authority's planning committee. The four councillors supported the views of the only objector against the application with whom they were closely connected in a personal and, in one case, a business capacity. Three of those councillors were also fellow members of the same local ward Labour party as that objector. Their objections were instrumental in the council refusing planning permission for the extension in spite of the fact that officers of the council had recommended its approval.

Although the four councillors were fully aware of the identity of the objector, not one of them declared their interest in any of the planning committee meetings.

[Mr. Jon Owen Jones]

That was a clear breach of the national code of local government conduct, which is clear about when interests should be declared. It says:

"You should not allow the impression to be created that you are, or may be, using your position to promote a private or personal interest rather than forwarding the general public interest. Private and personal interests include those of your family and friends as well as those arising through membership of, or association with, clubs, societies and other organisations such as the Freemasons, trade unions and voluntary bodies".

The code goes on to say:

"If you have a private or personal non-pecuniary interest in a matter arising from a local authority meeting, you should always disclose it, unless it is insignificant, or one which you share with other members of the public generally as a ratepayer, a community charge payer or an inhabitant of the area".

In this context, the councillors' association with the objector and their membership of a local ward political party were relevant issues. In those circumstances, where there has been a breach of the code, the ombudsman has a statutory duty to identify the councillors in his report.

Unfortunately, as my hon. Friend said, there was a typographical error in the ombudsman's final report, and a reference to a "previous meeting" mistakenly became a reference to a "private meeting". The error occurred during the copy typing of the monitoring officer's evidence, which was referred to in the ombudsman's final report. The typographical error, referring to a paragraph of the report which was highlighted by the press, implied that the three ward councillors had had a private meeting before the planning committee to determine the application. There was no evidence of such a meeting. I can well understand that local councillors would be aggrieved at being criticised for something that did not occur. I personally would like to record my regret that that happened.

The typographical error, however, had no bearing on the ombudsman's conclusion or his naming of the councillors. The ombudsman's decision to name the councillors would have been the same even if there had been no typographical error. The naming arose from his statutory duty and the fact that the councillors had not declared their interests during successive meetings of Caerphilly council's planning committee.

It is most unfortunate that the typographical error was not spotted before the ombudsman's report was published in its final form. However, it is important that the error does not divert attention from the ombudsman's findings in this case, which I regard as extremely serious.

Mr. Touhig: I must point out that in a letter of 28 July from Caerphilly county borough council, the ombudsman was asked the specific question:

"could you please explain the reference to a 'private meeting'?".

The fact that there was a query over the report was flagged up with the ombudsman, but he did not bother to respond in any way.

Mr. Jones: My hon. Friend anticipates the point that I am about to make.

The findings call into question the effectiveness of the existing national code of local government conduct, which requires councillors to act properly when reaching decisions, such as determining planning applications. I expect all Welsh councils to ensure that their elected members are fully aware of the requirements of the existing national code.

My hon. Friend's specific concerns are twofold. The first is that the typographical error was pointed out to the ombudsman before the report was published, but the ombudsman declined to change it. The second is that, although the ombudsman has now accepted the mistake, he refuses to apologise.

On the first point, I am satisfied that the ombudsman acted reasonably and did all that he could to ensure that there were no errors in his final report. The ombudsman circulated the draft report, for comment and for the purpose of checking its accuracy, to all those who gave evidence in this case, including the four councillors, the council's chief executive, the monitoring officer and other senior officers. He warned the council and councillors of his duty to name the councillors, given the apparent breaches of the code. The fact that there was a typographical error was not pointed out to the ombudsman. The council's members services manager did, however, raise a query as to what was meant by "private meeting".

It is understandable that the ombudsman ignored the members services manager's question. The ombudsman was at that stage unaware of the typographical error and believed, wrongly, that, as the words "private meeting" had been taken from the monitoring officer's evidence, it was a matter for the council itself to explain. The members services manager's question was not framed in a way that suggested that there had been an error or that it was an amendment to the text of the ombudsman's draft report. The monitoring officer had already written his response to the report and made no reference to any typographical error. Not one of the three ward councillors commented on the draft.

Mr. Touhig: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way again. I stress that the ombudsman wrote back on 31 July in response to the letter from the members services manager, and did not respond to any of the points raised there. If he thought at that time that the phrase "private meeting" was a matter for the council's monitoring officer, he should have written back and said, "I do not know what this is about. It is a matter for you, as the monitoring officer, to discover." The ombudsman did that, but only after the matter had been raised with him again some weeks later. He did not respond to the query at all.

Mr. Jones: I understand why my hon. Friend raises that point. It is also understandable, however, that the ombudsman did not believe at that stage that the original draft of the report was in any way incorrect. The council was responsible for the comments that had been made.

For the sake of completeness, I should make it clear that, once the error was discovered after the report's publication, the option of amending and reissuing the report was not available to the ombudsman. As the ombudsman is by law "functus officio"—I must be careful how I pronounce that—once he has issued his final decision, he cannot amend it in any way, unless he is ordered to do so by the courts following, for example, judicial review. The courts are likely to order him to do so only where there is a significant error or omission.

The second issue raised by my hon. Friend was that the ombudsman has accepted the mistake, but has refused to apologise for it. I am satisfied that, after the discovery of the typographical error, the ombudsman acted properly and did everything possible to explain the position and to inform those affected by the report of the error.

It is also my understanding that the ombudsman apologised for the error. He met the leader, chief executive and monitoring officer of Caerphilly council to explain the reason for the error and to apologise. He followed up the meeting with a letter, again apologising for the error. He also asked that his letter be reported to full council, which it was, and placed with the report for public inspection. Furthermore, he sent a letter to all recipients of the final report, including my hon. Friend, pointing out the error and apologising for it.

On a point of procedure, I remind my hon. Friend that the ombudsman is not accountable for his decisions to the Secretary of State for Wales or to Parliament. He is entirely independent, above political influence, being appointed directly by Her Majesty the Queen. It is important that such independence is maintained and not put in doubt. The proper and ultimate course of action open to anyone wishing to challenge an ombudsman's final decision is to seek a judicial review of that decision by the High Court.

The failure of councillors to follow the existing code of local government conduct suggests the need for a new code that is easier to understand and to which councillors are fully signed up. The Government intend to introduce such a code—the national code of conduct for local government in Wales—as part of an ethical framework. The Government will also introduce a much tougher enforcement regime, including an independent standards commission, to take effect in the event that codes are breached.

I hope that all councils will note the ombudsman's report in this case and will take steps to ensure that their councillors are fully aware of the requirements that the existing code places upon them. The public expect, and should receive, the highest standards of conduct from their elected members. Those elected members often do a difficult job. We owe it to them to ensure that the codes of conduct are easily understood. Clearly, a mistake was made by the councillors in this case. For that mistake, they paid a heavy price—a price that was made heavier by the typographical error that occurred.

I well understand why councillors were aggrieved, and why the local Member of Parliament would see it as his duty to try to do what he could to ensure that the public understood that the error, which was highlighted in the press, was typographical. There was no private meeting, and councillors were not responsible for that error.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at ten minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 28 January 1999

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Private Finance Initiative

1. **Mr. Dennis Canavan** (Falkirk, West): What assessment the Treasury has made of the *(a)* advantages and *(b)* disadvantages of private finance initiatives. [66514]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Alan Milburn): The private finance initiative is one of the forms of public-private partnership by which the Government are harnessing private sector finance, innovation and management skills to modernise our infrastructure and improve public services. This Government, unlike the previous Government, are making the PFI work in areas such as the NHS. Since the election, we have signed £4 billion of PFI deals.

Mr. Canavan: Will the Treasury investigate reports that a PFI secret deal led to three Edinburgh hospital buildings and their land being sold off to a private consortium, which stands to make £200 million by developing the land for housing, and will collect £30 million of public money per year for 30 years to build a new hospital, which will never become public property? Is it not a scandalous misuse of public money to encourage public asset stripping and privatisation of the NHS?

Mr. Milburn: Those are more rightly matters for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland. However, there are no PFI secret deals. This Government, unlike the previous Government, have opened up the whole process of PFI, so that local communities, the staff affected by the deals and the public who are served by the facilities that are built through the PFI have the right to know from the outset what the PFI is delivering for those communities. Unlike the previous Government—who managed to spend £30 million on lawyers' and accountants' fees in the NHS to try to get the PFI going, but did not build a single hospital—this Government have launched the biggest single new hospital building programme that the NHS has ever seen. We should be proud of that record.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): The experience of my constituents in the village of Hodnet—who want a bypass built by means of the PFI—directly contradicts the previous two replies from the Minister. As soon as the Government came to power, there was a review, new rules were laid down and the bid was prepared. However, another review has been launched. When will this reviewing stop, and when will clear guidelines be laid down so that people know where they stand?

Mr. Milburn: As usual, the Tory party is living in a dream world rather than the real world. The Government have signed £4 billion of PFI deals since the general election. What is more, during the next three years, we will sign a further £11 billion of PFI deals to modernise our health service, to improve standards in education and to improve the infrastructure that the hon. Gentleman talks about in local communities such as his own.

Mr. John Home Robertson (East Lothian): May I welcome the fact that the Government have been able to go ahead with the building of a new Edinburgh Royal infirmary? The people of my constituency and my part of Scotland have been waiting for that for years and years. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is rather bizarre that my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk, West (Mr. Canavan) regards that as a scandal? It is very good news.

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend—*[Interruption.]* Hon. Members should stop chuntering for a moment. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We fought the general election on a manifesto commitment to reinvigorate the PFI, and that is precisely what we have done. The consequence is being felt in communities up and down the land, and not just in terms of the NHS. We have signed our first PFI deals in the education sector for new schools to be built—including in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk, West (Mr. Canavan), where Falkirk council has concluded a PFI deal to replace five existing schools, with £65 million of new investment. There is more investment to come, with £350 million of PFI deals in the schools sector during the next three years. That is an important and successful record. In addition, not only are we making the PFI work, but we are doubling the public sector net investment in our economy, so sadly neglected by the Conservative party.

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): Pursuant to the right hon. Gentleman's answer to the hon. Member for Falkirk, West (Mr. Canavan), will the Minister answer a straightforward question? Does he believe that one disadvantage of the PFI system is that improvements in the public infrastructure will never become part of public ownership?

Mr. Milburn: Of course not. These deals are only given the go-ahead in the first place if it is demonstrated that they provide better value for money than the public sector comparator. There are strict rules about such deals in education and in health. Unlike the previous Government, we have been completely open about the comparisons between the public and private sector options to build.

Health and Education

2. **Mr. Ivor Caplin** (Hove): If he will make a statement on his plans for public spending on health and education for the next three years. [66515]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): The Government's spending plans for the next three years on health and education were set out in the comprehensive spending review White Paper, "Modern Public Services for Britain: Investing in Reform". We are providing money for modernisation, and we will invest an extra £40 billion in health and education in the coming three years.

Mr. Caplin: May I give my right hon. Friend some figures about local services? The comprehensive spending review will bring £30 million to local health services in Brighton and Hove, and already more than £1 million has been spent on local schools. That is desperately needed finance on health and education, which we were denied under the previous Government. The Labour party wants a just and fair approach to public spending, which the comprehensive spending review provides. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that this party intends to continue that approach in the forthcoming Budget?

Mr. Brown: First, I can tell my hon. Friend that this Government's third Budget will be announced in the afternoon of Tuesday 9 March. Secondly, on health and education expenditure, the average spending per constituency on education over the next three years will be £200 million, and on health, the average in the same period will be £236 million. In May, the electorate will be able to choose between a Conservative party that would not spend that money—and which says that our plans are reckless and mad—and a Labour party that will invest in health and education, and keep its promises.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): If the reports of above-inflation increases in pay for nurses and teachers are correct, they are to be welcomed, after years of basic and phased awards. However, does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the amounts being reported amount only to a catch-up, not to real increases? Will he ensure that the funding for the increases is transferred from the contingency reserves to ensure that the quality of education and health elsewhere is not cut?

Mr. Brown: I shall answer the question about pay, but let me point out to the Liberal Democrat Treasury spokesman that, whereas his party's election manifesto asked that £1.8 billion a year be spent on education, to a total of £5 billion over three years, the Government will spend £19 billion—four times as much—over the same period.

The Liberal Democrat manifesto also said that the party would spend £700 million a year on the health service, and a total of £2 billion over the next three years. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the Government will spend £21 billion over that period—10 times as much. I shall take no lectures from Liberal Democrats about meeting our fiscal rules and increasing public expenditure.

On public sector pay, I can tell the hon. Gentleman that we shall continue to be disciplined on public spending across the board. We will meet our fiscal rules and show the firm discipline set out in our three-year plans. The Government's policy has always been driven by the need to recruit, retain and motivate in the public services. However, we will not compromise our hard-won reputation for economic competence and fiscal prudence.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): I acknowledge the major increases that my right hon. Friend has earmarked for school services, but will he tell us how the Government will ensure that every extra pound allocated goes into the classroom and towards the provision of teachers? Does he audit the expenditure of the moneys by local education authorities? Sometimes the impression is that my right hon. Friend allocates the money, but that it does not go straight into school services.

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Not only have we allocated £20 billion to education and £20 billion extra to health, but we have set in place public service agreements that will ensure proper monitoring of the targets and value for money.

The Conservative Opposition said that it was wrong for the Government to scrap the assisted places scheme and to put that money into cutting class sizes for children aged five, six and seven. However, 100,000 pupils now benefit from that measure, and we will keep our promise that all children will be in classes of fewer than 30 pupils. Equally, we will keep our promises to improve numeracy and literacy, to increase the staying-on rate in schools, to get half a million more people in further and higher education and to provide lifelong education. We will do exactly the same for health. The Government will not only invest the money but, as my hon. Friend requested, we will ensure value for money.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): May I welcome the Chancellor's announcement of expenditure on health and education over the next three years? The £200 million will make up for a shortfall on past spending in Northern Ireland. Will the Chancellor seek to ensure that trusts budget properly for community care so that we can overcome bed blocking and make proper use of residential care?

Mr. Brown: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health is making sure that health and social services organisations work together, and I am sure that that will also be the case in the Northern Ireland Office. I was pleased to announce a few months ago our Northern Ireland initiative to help underpin the peace process with economic improvement. Every person who is long-term unemployed in Northern Ireland will benefit from the new deal, and Northern Ireland will pioneer the extension of the new deal to that group. In addition to extra money for health and education, we are ensuring that opportunities are available for the hon. Gentleman's constituents to get back to work.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): Has my right hon. Friend read today's report from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which concludes that the Government are on course to meet their borrowing and spending targets, and will avoid recession? The report comes in the same week in which a KPMG report on my part of the country concluded that Norfolk was in good shape to face any increased business pressures from the continuing effect

of the strong pound and turbulent world markets. I read yesterday of a similar outlook for business in London. Is my right hon. Friend encouraged by that evidence that his policy of economic stability is working despite the efforts of the Conservative party to talk us and wish us into recession?

Mr. Brown: We are steering a course of stability in a troubled world economy. The measures that we have put in place, including the independence of the Bank of England—opposed still by the Conservatives—were the right measures to create a long-term framework for monetary and fiscal stability. My hon. Friend is right about the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), who said that our plan to spend £40 billion on health and education was a reckless spending spree. The right hon. Gentleman said that we had lost control, that we were spending through the roof year after year, and that it was madness to embark on our spending programme. I ask Conservative Back-Bench Members to tell the shadow Chancellor that they agree that health and education deserve the extra £40 billion.

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): There are widespread rumours, most recently in yesterday's *Mirror*, that in order to fund higher social security spending, the Government intend to abolish tax relief on mortgages, which would cost the average mortgage holder £240 a year in extra taxes. Is that yet another example of the Government's creeping stealth taxes, or can the Chancellor reassure home owners that he has no such plan?

Mr. Brown: First, the shadow Chancellor is already on record as proposing the abolition of mortgage tax relief. Secondly, social security spending rose by 4 per cent. a year under the Conservative Government, to pay for unemployment. Under us, it is rising by less than 2 per cent. a year for the next three years.

The difference is that we are investing in proper services for the elderly and for children. The Conservatives wasted money paying the bills of unemployment. The Conservative Treasury spokesmen should be applauding the Government: the first 200,000 people are joining the welfare-to-work programme, 50,000 young people have jobs and youth unemployment has fallen by 41 per cent. However, they are against even the new deal. The Conservative party is not fit for Government, and it is not fit for Opposition either.

Low-Income Families

3. **Dr. Stephen Ladyman** (South Thanet): If he will make a statement on progress with his plans to help working families on low incomes. [66516]

13. **Caroline Flint** (Don Valley): What measures he is taking to increase the net income of those in low-paid work. [66529]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): The Government have introduced a number of measures to increase the net income of low-income families. Measures include the introduction of the national minimum wage, reform of national insurance contributions and the introduction of the working families tax credit. Together, those reforms will provide a guaranteed income for families in full-time work of £190 a week, or £10,000 a year. More than a million people will benefit from the working families tax credit.

Dr. Ladyman: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. His measures to help low-income families will help hundreds of families in my constituency and throughout east Kent. Those people will have been astounded and horrified that the Tories and Liberals opposed the working families tax credit on Monday. Will he promise to examine each year his minimum income guarantee and increase it when he can afford to? Does he agree that what the Tories mean by putting clear blue water between our two parties is that, because they intend to scrap the working families tax credit, they mean to become, even more than now, the party of the rich, and use their clear blue water to trap low-income families in poverty?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is right, but even rich people are against the Conservative party now. On his constituency point, 100,000 men and women in the south-east of England will benefit from the working families tax credit. Throughout the country, more than 1 million people will benefit. For the first time, this country will have a minimum family income of £190 a week, or £10,000 a year, and income tax bills will not be sent until £220 a week, or £11,000 a year, is being earned. That is a major advance. The country will want to know why the Conservatives oppose the new deal, the minimum wage and now the working families tax credit. Even Sir Winston Churchill supported minimum wages. Why is the Conservative party now against fairness for people in work?

Caroline Flint: The one in nine families in Don Valley who will benefit from the working families tax credit will welcome the opportunity to earn £10,000 a year. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is nothing short of scandalous that the Opposition opposed the minimum wage, the working families tax credit and the new deal, which has halved youth employment in my constituency? I hope that the next time that he is in South Yorkshire, he will take the opportunity to hammer home the message that the Conservatives are the party of poverty and mass unemployment, and that we are the party fighting social injustice.

Mr. Brown: Most people will agree that the behaviour of the Conservative Opposition in opposing the working families tax credit does no credit to their traditions. In Yorkshire and Humberside, 125,000 families will benefit from its introduction next October. When people understand that there is a minimum family income of £10,000 a year for all who can work and that work pays more than benefits, they will see that we have made a big advance in employment, social security and tax legislation.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Does the Chancellor of the Exchequer agree with the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) that the working families tax credit offers huge bonuses for dishonesty? Why does he think that the United Kingdom will succeed where Canada failed? A similar system had to be withdrawn there because of massive fraud.

Mr. Brown: If the hon. Gentleman is an expert on north America, perhaps he will consider the experience of

the United States economy, where people have benefited from the earned income tax credit after its introduction by a Republican Administration and its extension under a Democratic one. Our people will want to know why something supported by Ronald Reagan is unacceptable to the hon. Gentleman. That is a lurch to the right even for this Conservative party.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): Does the Chancellor accept that in the areas with the lowest average incomes in these islands, such as South Yorkshire, Merseyside, Cornwall and Wales, people look to objective 1 funding from the European Union to boost local economies? Will he confirm that up to now, the UK has taken only one third of the money available from those funds and will he categorically assert that matching funds will be available, over and above current expenditure, to ensure that those areas maximise the benefit of European funding?

Mr. Brown: I hope that the right hon. Gentleman welcomes the fact that when I was in Wales on Monday, I was able to announce that modern apprenticeships, which will help the industrial economy of Wales, will be extended from 9,000 to 15,000 people there. Thus apprenticeships, which were dying out under the previous Government, are not only back but modern, and a 50 per cent. increase will be achieved.

In all the European negotiations, we shall protect the position of the regions and argue their case. Some 65,000 families in Wales stand to benefit from the working families tax credit and from the minimum wage, which will be introduced in April.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Low-paid people in my constituency welcome the national minimum wage and the working families tax credit. They also welcome the Government's measures to keep inflation low, to increase child benefit and to reduce VAT on fuel. Their message to my right hon. Friend is that he has done an excellent job. Will he assure them that he will continue to do so?

Mr. Brown: I am glad that the working families tax credit is welcomed in the north-west, but it is not welcomed by the Conservative party. On the "Today" programme, the shadow Chancellor said:

"The first thing that should be done is to abandon these crazy plans to increase costs on business. The minimum wage is one of them".

The 2 million people who will benefit from the minimum wage in April will never vote Conservative again.

Exchange Rate Mechanism

4. **Mr. Graham Brady** (Altrincham and Sale, West): What representations he has received on the possibility of Britain entering the exchange rate mechanism. [66517]

14. **Mr. John Cryer** (Hornchurch): If he will make a statement on Britain's future relationship with the European exchange rate mechanism. [66530]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): The Government have no intention of rejoining the exchange rate mechanism.

Mr. Brady: I thank the Chancellor for that answer. If he does, however, intend to keep open Britain's options of joining the euro in 2002 or before, how does he plan to ensure that Britain complies with article 109j of the Maastricht treaty, now article 121 of the Amsterdam treaty?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman should know that the resolution that came out of Amsterdam said clearly:

"Participation in the exchange-rate mechanism will be voluntary for the Member States outside the euro area."

I believe that that answers his question. Any questions about the Maastricht treaty would be better directed to the shadow Chancellor, who signed it.

Mr. Cryer: My right hon. Friend will know that the Bank of England has already signed an agreement with the European central bank called "ERM II", which is effectively the new exchange rate mechanism. We are, therefore, already in the new exchange rate mechanism and the bands will narrow as we approach 2002. How does that affect the Government's neutrality on the single currency?

Mr. Brown: I must correct my hon. Friend: the Government have no intention of rejoining the exchange rate mechanism. We are not part of it.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): If the Chancellor wants guidance on this important article of the Amsterdam treaty, formerly the Maastricht treaty, may I remind him that it requires not membership of the ERM, but observance of the normal fluctuation margins provided for by the ERM for at least two years? That obligation is in the treaty, and the Government will be obliged to follow it if they wish to keep that option open. Does he agree that it is a serious requirement for any country that aspires to join the single currency?

Mr. Brown: The right hon. Gentleman should read what was said at Amsterdam. The Amsterdam European Council resolution of June 1997 said:

"Participation in the exchange-rate mechanism will be voluntary for the Member States outside the euro area."—

[Interruption.] I know that Conservatives are obsessed about every detail of treaties, but I remind the shadow Chancellor that he signed the Maastricht treaty.

Mr. Maude: That provision is still in the treaty, and it is there for a serious purpose: to ensure that, before an economy joins the single currency, it shows the right degree of exchange rate stability. Therefore, at some stage the Government will have to change the Bank of England Act 1998 in order for the Monetary Policy Committee to shadow the euro rather than pursue a domestic inflation target.

Mr. Brown *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Maude: The Chancellor shakes his head in a complacent and dismissive way. Does he agree with Gavyn Davies of Goldman Sachs, who said that, at some point—*[Interruption.]* The new Chief Secretary should listen, because the Government will have to deal with this

point if they insist on railroading the country towards a single currency. Gavyn Davies said:

"at some point the Bank of England will have to be told to 'shadow' the euro (instead of inflation) for a two-year period to stabilise exchange rates ahead of joining".

Does the Chancellor agree with that?

Mr. Brown: The shadow Chancellor is right on one thing: it will be the Labour party that has to deal with those matters right into the next century, because we shall be in government and the Conservatives will be out of government. As for the resolution of Amsterdam, let me repeat:

"Participation in the exchange-rate mechanism will be voluntary for the Member States".

I have said clearly to the right hon. Gentleman that we have no intention of rejoining the ERM. It is only the Conservatives who are obsessed by the ERM, and we now know why that is: when the right hon. Gentleman was at the Treasury, the Conservative Government took us in, and we had to leave ignominiously as a result of their mistakes.

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): I welcome my right hon. Friend's comments on the ERM, but is he aware that the later the date set for our entry into the euro, the more difficult will be the conditions applied to us? Will he take that into account when deciding that date?

Mr. Brown: I set out the Government's position on economic and monetary union in October 1997 and I see no reason to change that position. In principle, we are in favour of monetary union and being a part of it, subject to the economic tests that I have set down being met. I have said that it is not a realistic option to join in the current Parliament, but that we shall consider it in the next Parliament and apply those economic tests. Incidentally, in October 1997, I also said that we had no intention of rejoining the ERM, and I am absolutely consistent on that as well.

Comprehensive Spending Review

5. **Jackie Ballard** (Taunton): What plans he has to repeat the comprehensive spending review. [66518]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Alan Milburn): The comprehensive spending review was a root-and-branch examination of departmental programmes to ensure that public spending was directed to the Government's priorities during the remainder of this Parliament and beyond. A further review will take place in 2000, when the plans set out in the comprehensive spending review will be rolled forward for the next three financial years.

Jackie Ballard: Will the Minister admit that the Government made a blunder when they stuck to the Tory spending plans for the first two years? Does he accept that the results of that blunder have been real pay cuts for teachers and nurses, worsening morale and recruitment difficulties? Will he promise not to repeat that blunder when he repeats the spending review?

Mr. Milburn: As usual, the Liberals want to have their cake and eat it. I thought that the hon. Lady was rising to thank the Government for the extra investment in her constituency: Somerset county council's standard spending assessment is to rise by 6.5 per cent. from April this year—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] There is more: Somerset health authority's spending is to rise by 3.8 per cent. in real terms from this April. When we entered government, we had to take tough decisions because of the reckless mess in which the Tories had left us, but the fruits of that are now being seen in the fact that we shall meet our tough fiscal rules while maintaining our commitment to extra investment in our schools and hospitals from April this year.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): The comprehensive spending review was a splendid initiative which released billions of pounds for our health and education services. My question relates to the national register of assets—those bits and pieces, lay-bys and so on, around the country that the Government allegedly no longer need to own. New Covent Garden market is valued at about £45 million, but its being sold off will do tremendous damage to the fruit, vegetable and flower market in central London. Will my hon. Friend reconsider the issue, perhaps with his colleagues in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food?

Mr. Milburn: I was not aware that my hon. Friend had a constituency interest in New Covent Garden market—perhaps he is a frequent visitor. I can tell him only that any sale has to meet strict value-for-money tests.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Why do we have to wait until 2000 for the new comprehensive spending review? Should not it be initiated right now, starting in the right hon. Gentleman's own Department? How come the son of the manse has suddenly abandoned his frugality and started chartering aeroplanes and helicoptering around Bangkok? What about his right hon. Friend from across the Pennines, the Minister for the Cabinet Office, who appears to have acquired the soubriquet "Concorde Jack"?

Mr. Milburn: Of all the serious questions—health, education, employment or social security—that the hon. Gentleman could have raised at Treasury Question Time, he and the Conservative party have not a word to say because they think that our spending plans are reckless. It is about time that they came clean about which schools would close, which hospitals would close and which social security spending would be cut. We know that they would get rid of the minimum wage and the working families tax credit, with dire consequences for millions of people.

On the hon. Gentleman's question, he knows as well as I that there are strict rules governing the issue. We abide by those rules, which are the same as those that were applied when his party was in government.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Will my right hon. Friend bear it in mind that some Labour Members are not very happy about the fact that some people want to live the high life and fly in Concorde? I have been here long enough to see dramatic change on this issue, and 20 years

ago, when the previous Labour Government were in office, the cry from Tory MPs was, "Why aren't Ministers flying in Concorde?"

Mr. Milburn: As my hon. Friend knows, consistency has never been a Tory strong point.

Madam Speaker: That hardly relates to the issue, as I might have suspected.

Withholding Tax

6. **Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith** (Wealden): What recent representations he has received regarding the withholding tax. [66519]

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): I assume that the right hon. Gentleman is referring to the draft directive on the taxation of savings. We have received a number of representations on that subject. Most have expressed their concern about the potential effect of the draft directive on the eurobond market. We share that concern and I have already made it clear that we believe that eurobonds should be excluded.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: Bearing in mind what the hon. Lady said last December, if eurobonds are excluded, why have not the Government decided to veto the matter, or do they intend to show that it would introduce a system that would only increase transaction costs?

Dawn Primarolo: We have made it clear in the negotiations on the draft directive that we believe, first, that eurobonds should be excluded; secondly, that the best way forward is exchange of information and, thirdly, that we would not agree to any measure that would seriously damage Britain's interests. We are negotiating according to what is best for Britain.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): Will the Minister confirm that the Government are opposed to tax evasion, that the withholding tax is an attempt to deal with tax evasion and that if the withholding tax is formulated to protect the eurobond market, it is worth pursuing? Does she share my view that on tax co-ordination, the Conservative party is suffering from selective amnesia, given that in the early 1990s, under Norman Lamont, the previous Government agreed to VAT proposals in the most substantive measure of tax co-ordination that this country has ever had?

Dawn Primarolo: I agree with my hon. Friend's point about the importance that the Government place on effective international action on tax evasion. However, in negotiations on the draft directive, we have continued to make it clear that exchange of information is the best way forward, and I repeat that eurobonds should be excluded from the draft directive.

On the consistency of Conservative Members, it was the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) who signed the memorandum and introduced proposals to the House on the VAT rate of 15 per cent. Before that, the deputy leader of the Conservative party also signed that memorandum. They do not have mere collective amnesia—it is verging on dishonesty—about what they did in government.

Madam Speaker: Order. I am sure that the hon. Lady will want to withdraw that accusation.

Dawn Primarolo: I was referring to the dishonesty of a Government, Madam Speaker, and I was not for a moment inferring that individuals were dishonest. Of course I withdraw the remark.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): Will the Paymaster General, whom I congratulate on her new title, assure the House that she understands that transaction costs represent as much of an invisible threat to the competitiveness of the City of London as withholding tax represents a visible threat?

Dawn Primarolo: We have continually made it clear as a Government—as I have in answering questions in the House—that protection of the European financial markets, especially the City of London, is very high on the Government's agenda. We would not agree to anything that seriously damaged that market.

Mr. John Whittingdale (Maldon and East Chelmsford): The hon. Lady has rightly said that she wants to protect the eurobond market, but does not the fact that that market consists of unregistered bearer bonds make her favoured solution of information provision impossible? Does not she accept that information sharing is as damaging to the City as a withholding tax? Will she make it clear that the Government will veto any such proposal?

Dawn Primarolo: I think that the hon. Gentleman misunderstands the proposal. Although I am repeating myself, I shall make it clear again that we want eurobonds to be excluded from the directive and will not agree to anything that either seriously damages the City of London or is not in the best interests of the British economy. The hon. Gentleman is slightly confused in his questioning. Perhaps he would tell the House whether he thinks that eurobonds should be within the draft directive or agrees with us that they should be excluded?

Euro

7. **Mr. Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South): If he will make a statement on the launch of the euro. [66520]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Ms Patricia Hewitt) *rose—[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. Something has been said that I did not hear. *[Interruption.]* I did not hear whether any hon. Member used a term of abuse. *[Interruption.]* Order. Was it Mr. Gibb? [HON. MEMBERS: "Yes."] I believe that you insulted half the population, Mr. Gibb, by referring to "stupid" women. As I happen to be a woman, I would like an apology from you.

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): If I inadvertently insulted an hon. Member, I withdraw the remark.

Ms Hewitt: The Government welcome the successful launch of the euro, which reflects the extensive planning

and preparation carried out by Governments, firms and institutions. In the City of London, conversion procedures were completed with no serious difficulties. Over the conversion weekend, some 30,000 London staff were involved in adapting systems and preparing for the successful start of euro trading. I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in praising their efforts. It is thanks to them that London is ready to be the leading international centre for euro trading.

Mr. Chapman: Does my hon. Friend agree that British business very much welcomes the Government's approach to European monetary union, believing it right that business be helped to prepare for the euro? Does she agree with me, and, indeed, firms in my constituency, many of which are major multinationals, that to follow the Conservative party's policy of turning our backs on Europe would be not only disastrous for the United Kingdom economy but totally barmy?

Ms Hewitt: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. A successful euro will be good for Europe and good for Britain. I welcome the fact, as I know he does, that the information campaign that we ran last year doubled awareness among small and medium businesses of the need to prepare for the euro, and trebled the number of businesses that are making preparations. Given that half our trade is with the euro area, it is essential that every business, in his constituency and across the country, takes advantage of the opportunities that the euro creates.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): The hon. Lady's extraordinarily smug reply about the City of London's preparations had absolutely nothing to do with the Government, and more to do with the City's effectiveness and primacy in world markets. Does she agree that, despite the fact that, naturally, more businesses are aware of the euro, the Government need, with greater vigour, to redouble their efforts in order to ensure that many more businesses receive practical help in understanding the nature of the euro's impact on them?

Ms Hewitt: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman apparently did not wish to join me in congratulating the City of London on its success in preparing for the euro, but I am pleased that he supports the efforts that we have been making to urge business to prepare, and I am glad that he supports the very practical steps that the Treasury and its departments are taking to ensure that business has the information that it needs—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman should listen to the reply. We shall continue to do everything necessary to ensure that British businesses prepare for the euro and are successful in trading with the euro currency area. I am just sorry that the hon. Gentleman is not interested in helping British business succeed.

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): Is my hon. Friend aware that many firms in Northamptonshire—not major multinationals, but quite small firms—already have euro bank accounts, and are working with the euro and effectively regard it as a working currency here? Is she aware of the KPMG report that showed that only 5 per cent. of city firms support the Conservatives' option on entry to the euro, and that some 30 per cent. support the Government's option? Does she agree that the pretence—encouraged by the Conservative party—that the euro is preventable is profoundly damaging for the economy and this country's interests?

Ms Hewitt: I am very aware of the great interest that my hon. Friend takes in this subject, and I am sure that businesses in her constituency are grateful for the help that she has given them. I entirely agree with her about the need to ensure that businesses are fully involved in making a success of the euro, and I agree that the Conservative party has effectively moved from being simply against the euro to being against Europe.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): Are the Government aware that, yesterday, the Bank of America decided not to proceed with additional commitments to the City because of uncertainty over British entry to EMU? Following that decision and the earlier loss of the German bond market from the LIFFE—London international financial futures exchange—market to Frankfurt, what further evidence do the Government need that British exclusion from EMU is deeply damaging to the interests of the City of London?

Ms Hewitt: Yesterday, at a meeting—chaired by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor—of the Standing Committee on Preparations for the Euro, it was clear from what the Governor of the Bank of England and representatives of the City of London said that, as I said earlier, the City of London is taking every advantage of the opportunities created by the euro, and will continue to ensure that it meets competitive challenges and retains its position as the leading international centre for trading in euros.

Mr. Giles Radice (North Durham): While I congratulate the Government on the attitude that they are taking and on the way that they are trying to prepare industry for the opportunities of the euro, does my hon. Friend agree that it is in the national interest to join sooner rather than later?

Ms Hewitt: The Government's position on joining the euro was set out in the statement made to the House by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor in October 1997. The central test must be whether joining a successful single currency is good for the British economy, good for British business, good for jobs and good for the City. As my right hon. Friend said in that statement, there is no realistic prospect of being able to make that judgment before the next election. However, we are ensuring that preparations are in hand, so that we can take a decision early in the new Parliament.

If joining a successful single currency would be clearly and unambiguously good for this economy, of course, in principle, it must be right to join, but the economic tests must be met. Extraordinarily, the Conservative party takes the view that, even if joining the single currency were good for British business and good for jobs, it would still oppose joining.

Harmful Tax Competition

8. **Mr. Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham): If he will make a statement on the harmful tax measures referred by the UK Government to the code of conduct working group on harmful tax competition. [66521]

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): As I said in my answer of 17 December 1998 to the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb), the measures from the UK are international headquarters companies, special tax measures for the film industry, enterprise zones, 100 per cent. first-year capital allowances for small and medium enterprises in Northern Ireland, and roll-over relief for balancing charges arising on the disposal of shipping.

That does not imply that the measures are actually harmful under the code. Discussions on these and other measures are proceeding. International holding companies are due to be abolished this April, following decisions made earlier by the Government. The Government are confident that the other four measures are not actually harmful within the meaning of the code, and are robustly making the case.

Mr. Loughton: Can the hon. Lady tell us the details contained in the measures on her list with regard to the British shipping industry, British enterprise zones and the British film industry? When will she publish in full the details of the measures on the list? Will she give the House a guarantee that before she signs away any of the House's competence on tax matters to be decided here behind closed doors, she will have the courtesy first to debate those measures with hon. Members?

Dawn Primarolo: The measures have already been published in a written answer on 17 December 1998, and I have repeated verbally today the measures listed in the UK's name. With regard to my right to sign away anything on behalf of the Government, I do not have such a right. I am subject to scrutiny in these matters, and I am sure that the House will ensure that that takes place.

Mr. Jim Cousins (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): May I urge my hon. Friend to tackle tax competition where it is harmful to British interests? I draw to her attention the corporation tax regime in the Republic of Ireland, which offers a selective tax concession on new company profits where there is new inward investment. That is harmful tax competition which damages inward investment opportunities in the north-east of England and, I might add, in the north-east of Ireland.

Dawn Primarolo: General rates of corporation tax are not included in the scope of the code. I can tell my hon. Friend that the code of conduct working group is looking at measures and their impact, and at whether they encourage artificially the location of investment, distorting the allocation of real investment. That deals with my hon. Friend's point. It is not only the European Union that is examining these issues—the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the G7 are doing so too.

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): In that context, may we have an absolute assurance that the Government will veto all attempts to harmonise direct or indirect taxation?

Dawn Primarolo: We will always protect the British national interest. We have repeatedly made that clear in the House.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Does my hon. Friend agree that competition on corporation tax between nation states in euroland is a good thing, as it brings about a more competitive average rate in Europe to attract inward investment? Will she fight to ensure that competition on corporation tax in Europe continues?

Dawn Primarolo: The simple answer is yes. The priorities for the European Union must be employment and competitive markets. That is what we should be taking forward.

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): Does the Minister accept that the entire exercise is extremely dangerous? Unfair tax competition is simply another term for low taxes enjoyed by this country, which give us an advantage in the European and global market. Some of the measures to which the hon. Lady referred were passed in the Government's first Finance Bill, yet their measures are already under scrutiny in the secret group that she chairs. That shows that what the Government do in one Finance Bill they have to unravel in another. Will she ensure that she keeps the House fully informed about the measures, and will she announce today that she will adopt a policy of vetoing wherever possible any undermining of our tax advantage, which was built up over many years by this Government—by this party?

Dawn Primarolo: That was nearly a compliment for the Government, and congratulation on our economic strategy.

I say to the right hon. Gentleman again that general rates of corporation tax are not included in considerations within that particular group. I also remind him that the previous Government signed a resolution at the ECOFIN Council of November 1992, when they said that

"consideration is urgently needed of possible remedies to"

the problems of unfair tax competition. That is precisely what is happening, and the right hon. Gentleman should not look for conspiracies everywhere, although I understand that there are a few going on in his party at the moment.

Inheritance Tax

9. **Mr. Andrew F. Bennett** (Denton and Reddish): What assessment he has made of the effects of reducing inheritance tax in return for concessions. [66522]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mrs. Barbara Roche): The conditional exemption scheme assists in the protection and preservation of assets of appropriate heritage quality and secures reasonable public access to them.

Mr. Bennett: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her new post, and also note that we have an increasing number of women in the Treasury team, which is a big contrast to the Conservative party.

Will my hon. Friend bring her traditional vigour to the question of the concessions that have been given for access to land, because that has been one of the great rip-offs? People have offered access to land, on a very limited number of occasions, in return for reductions in inheritance tax. That was looked at again during consideration of the previous Finance Bill, and new provisions were put in. How many new negotiations have taken place under the new provisions, and does she agree that it would be better to get rid of those concessions and simply have a right of access to all mountain and moorland, for all the public?

Mrs. Roche: I know of the great interest that my hon. Friend has taken in that issue for a long time. He is right to say that the conditional exemption scheme rules were strengthened by the previous Finance Bill. Detailed rules are being drawn up at the moment, because the assets have to be listed so that the public can get information about them. It is absolutely right to strike a balance between maintaining and preserving our heritage in terms of land and buildings and making absolutely sure that the public—who pay for the tax referral—gain advantage for that.

My hon. Friend rightly pointed out the problems that the Opposition face. I thank him for his warm welcome to my new post, and I note that there is not one woman Conservative Member of Parliament in the Chamber.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove) *rose—*

Mrs. Roche: Apart from the hon. Lady. *[Interruption.]* I know how excited Conservative Members are about inheritance tax, but they should not get so excited that they forget that the hon. Lady, whom I warmly welcome, has been present for only the last two minutes of Question Time. It is hardly surprising, given the lack of representation of women, that the Conservative party's internal polling shows that it is widely out of touch with the British people.

Public Services

10. **Ms Joan Ryan** (Enfield, North): If he will make a statement about the overall level of public spending on the major public services for the next three years. [66523]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Alan Milburn): Over the next three years the Government will spend an extra £40 billion on modernising the United Kingdom's health services and on raising standards in education.

The spending increases on our key priorities are in the context of prudent expenditure plans overall. Spending is now linked to achievement of clear objectives and targets, as set out in the public service agreements for each Department.

Ms Ryan: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. My constituents warmly welcome the extra money that the Government have put into our vital public services. That means that, because my constituents are under Enfield and Haringey health authority, we have had an extra £3 million to deal with waiting lists. Our waiting lists will be down by 3,000 by March. The extra £2 million of winter pressures money, which is a new development introduced by this Government, has meant that, over the past two winters, our accident and emergency departments have coped well and have not had to close their doors at any point.

Will my right hon. Friend guarantee that he will pay absolutely no heed—no heed at all—to the Conservative party's proposals, which would cut public funding, damage my constituents and damage the people of Britain?

Mr. Milburn: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend that commitment. Her constituents are now seeing the benefit of this Government's prudent management of public finances, and extra investment will be made from April this year. The question that they are all asking is "What on earth would happen to the health service and our schools if, heaven help us, the Conservative party ever returned to power?"

Business of the House

12.30 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): Will the Leader of the House tell us the business for next week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 1 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the House of Lords Bill.

TUESDAY 2 FEBRUARY—Conclusion of Second Reading of the House of Lords Bill.

WEDNESDAY 3 FEBRUARY—Until 2 o'clock there will be debates on the motion for the Adjournment of the House.

Opposition Day [5th Allotted Day].

Until about 7 o'clock, there will be a debate on the Government's record on pensions, followed by a debate on planning and the green belt. Both debates will arise on Opposition motions.

THURSDAY 4 FEBRUARY—Motion on the Police Grant report (England and Wales).

Motions on the English Revenue Support Grant Reports.

FRIDAY 5 FEBRUARY—The House will not be sitting. The provisional business for the following week will be as follows:

MONDAY 8 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Social Security Contributions (Transfer of Functions, etc) Bill *[Lords]*.

TUESDAY 9 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Employment Relations Bill.

WEDNESDAY 10 FEBRUARY—Until 2 o'clock, there will be debates on the motion for the Adjournment of the House.

Until about 7 o'clock, consideration in Committee of the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill.

Remaining stages of the Water Industry Bill.

THURSDAY 11 FEBRUARY—Until 4 o'clock, motions on the Welsh Revenue Support Grant reports.

Motions on the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order and the Housing Support Grant (Scotland) Order.

Motions on the Scotland Act 1998 (Transitional and Transitory Provisions (Finance) Order and the Scotland Act 1998 (Transitional and Transitory Provisions) (Appropriations) Order.

FRIDAY 12 FEBRUARY—The House will not be sitting.

Hon. Members may have heard my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announce that he will make his Budget statement on Tuesday 9 March. I can also announce that a Committee of the House will scrutinise the draft Food Standards Bill which was published yesterday, along the lines set out in the Modernisation Committee's first report in the last Session. A Committee will be specially established for the purpose. It has been proposed that it will be established next week, and asked to report by the end of March.

As I have said on other occasions, I did not think that it would be possible in the current Session fully to meet the recommendation of the Modernisation Committee's report on the parliamentary calendar that there should be a non-sitting or constituency week in mid-February; but, in an endeavour to meet the spirit of the recommendation, it will be proposed—subject to the progress of business, and to agreement through the usual channels—that the House should adjourn at the end of business on Tuesday 16 February, until Monday 22 February.

Sir George Young: I thank the Leader of the House for giving us next week's business and an indication of business in the following week, and for her other announcements.

Can we be assured that the House will have an opportunity to debate Kosovo next week if the issue of NATO military action arises? Can the right hon. Lady tell us when the Government will announce their decisions on the pay review board's recommendations? Can she ensure that next week we shall have answers from the Chancellor to questions about arrangements for his travel to and in the far east—questions answered by every other Cabinet Minister but which the Chancellor has unreasonably refused to answer?

Finally, may we have a debate on the constitutional propriety of members of a Select Committee seeking to hold Ministers to account, while at the same time engaging in collaborative discussions with those very Ministers?

Mrs. Beckett: I cannot promise the right hon. Gentleman a debate next week on Kosovo, but I can assure him that the Government keep under review issues of such importance as Kosovo. I will bear his observations in mind. He asked me when we expect to announce the results of the pay review bodies. They will be announced in due course and in the normal way. He also asked me about answers from the Chancellor of the Exchequer. My understanding is that the Chancellor has answered questions on matters that have been put to him in line with normal rules of ministerial accountability.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman asked me about the propriety of engaging in debate and relationships within Select Committees in varying circumstances. I think that all hon. Members always engage with propriety in their discussions and there are, of course, many forums in which those discussions take place.

Mr. John McWilliam (Blaydon): Has my right hon. Friend had the opportunity to speak to the Foreign Secretary about the serious situation that is developing in Gibraltar following the arrests of fishermen with their well named trawler La Pirana; the blockade threatened by Spanish fishermen on the Gibraltar land border; and the statement, apparently by the Spanish Foreign Secretary, that he regards Gibraltar and its people as economic parasites? Will we have an opportunity to debate that next week if the situation worsens?

Mrs. Beckett: I must concede that I was not aware of the detail of the issues that have been raised by my hon. Friend. Obviously, we always try to preserve good relations with all our allies and in all circumstances, but I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will take heed of my hon. Friend's comments.

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): I thank the Leader of the House for her announcement about the constituency days, if not a constituency week. I am sure that that will be welcome.

I draw the right hon. Lady's attention to early-day motion 162.

[*That this House welcomes the competition provided by mutual organisations in the financial services sector as demonstrated by three independent end of year surveys which show that building societies provide cheaper mortgages and better performing TESSAs; believes that choice and diversity in the financial services sector is in the best interests of consumers; welcomes the resolve of the board of the Bradford and Bingley Building Society to remain a mutual as being in the best long term interest of its members; strongly supports the six other building societies that have each received a board nomination and an identical conversion resolution from a pro-conversion candidate who has failed to be elected to the Nationwide Building Society for two years in a row; and, recognising that building societies' mutual status can continue to be challenged in this way every year, calls for a review of the regulatory framework to end the unnecessary disruption that this causes and ensure a level playing field with their competitors in the financial services sector.*]

Will she be able to find time for a ministerial statement next week, or the week after, in which the Government will announce the measures that they will introduce to stop the annual round of wrecking motions by predators on mutual building societies? That move would be widely welcomed in the House and protect the mutual building society sector.

Mrs. Beckett: I have some sympathy with the points that the hon. Gentleman makes. We recognise the diversity and competition that building societies bring to the savings and loans markets. The future of those societies, of course, remains in the hands of their boards and members. A change can be made only with their agreement. However, I cannot promise the hon. Gentleman a debate on the matter in the near future.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Taking into account your strictures of last week, Madam Speaker, that, in asking for debates during this Question Time, our requests should relate to the following week's business—

Madam Speaker: Order. Members may question the business statement. The Leader of the House has given the business for more than one week. They may question the statement that she has made.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I wonder, then, whether my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House might consider allowing for a debate some time in the next two weeks on how it was that the National Westminster bank induced its innocent customers to invest in what the bank knew to be a duff and failing business, and how it deliberately and carefully refused to reveal that information to its innocent customers? Has she seen the press release that has been put out by National Westminster bank, in which it rebuts my allegation, which I know to be true, that Mr. Peter Stern was directly involved in that subterfuge?

Mrs. Beckett: I have not seen the press release to which my hon. Friend refers. I detect that the entire House feels a growing sympathy for his call for a debate. However, I am not able to grant it within the two-week time scale.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): In asking the question, I declare an unremunerated interest as the president of the British Art Market Federation. Now that we are within a month of the relevant Council of Ministers meeting on droit de suite, will the Leader of the House contemplate allowing a debate in the next fortnight on both droit de suite and the related subject of value added tax on works of art that are imported to the European Union?

Mrs. Beckett: I am afraid that I cannot undertake at this moment to give the right hon. Gentleman the debate that he seeks. I recognise that this is an important and controversial issue and I shall draw his remarks to the attention of my right hon. and hon. Friends.

Mr. Denzil Davies (Llanelli): Will my right hon. Friend consider holding a full-day debate over the next two weeks on the order that will transfer the functions of the Secretary of State for Wales to the Welsh Assembly? She will be aware that the transfer is very important, because it could define the relationship between the Assembly and this House, between the Secretary of State for Wales and the Assembly and between the Assembly and Europe. The relevant provisions for Scotland were contained in a schedule to the Scotland Act 1998, but the details of the transfer of powers for Wales have never been debated.

Mrs. Beckett: My right hon. Friend will be aware that the draft transfer order is subject to affirmative procedure in both Houses, so there will be an opportunity to debate it. The time and length of that debate is normally a matter for the usual channels. I understand the strength of my right hon. Friend's case. I fear that I cannot undertake at the moment to give him a whole day for a debate, but I shall bear his views in mind.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): During Treasury Question Time earlier today, I asked about the European Union withholding tax. The Government are involved in discussions with the EU about the future of the tax, which could have important implications for the City and others. Will she bear in mind that it would be highly desirable for that complex matter to be fully debated in the House during the next two weeks?

Mrs. Beckett: As the right hon. Gentleman said, he has just had an opportunity to raise the issue at Treasury questions. I recognise that discussions are continuing and have some sympathy with his wish to air the matter further. However, I cannot undertake to give him time in the next two weeks.

Mr. Jim Marshall (Leicester, South): Will my right hon. Friend try to ensure that we have a full three hours for the debate on the revenue support grant settlement for England on Thursday of next week? Will she seek to discourage those of my right hon. and hon. Friends who merely wish to congratulate the Government from participating in the debate, so that those of us who have serious concerns about the settlement are able to speak?

Mrs. Beckett: I understand my hon. Friend's call for a sufficiently long debate. That is a matter for arrangements through the usual channels, but we shall do our utmost to

[Mrs. Beckett]

satisfy him. Who is called to speak in the debate is a matter for the Speaker and I would not dream of trespassing on that responsibility.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Does the right hon. Lady recall being asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill) during the debate on the modernisation proposals on 16 December last year

"whether she is satisfied that the opportunity for Back Benchers to hold the Executive to account will not be reduced as a result of the proposals"?—[*Official Report*, 16 December 1998; Vol. 322, c. 989.]

She answered, "Absolutely and categorically." Is she aware that on Tuesday the Greater London Authority Bill Standing Committee chose not to meet until 2.30 pm today, rather than at 9 am?

The right hon. Lady gave us the distinct impression that Standing Committees would meet at 9 am when assuring us that there would be no reduction in the hours available to Back Benchers to hold the Government to account. Can we have an urgent debate on the effects already being shown by the modernisation proposals in dramatically reducing the opportunities for the House to hold the Government to account? The arrangements may satisfy the Leader of the House and her fellow Ministers, but they sure as hell do not satisfy me.

Mrs. Beckett: This is all so much nonsense. The hours that a Committee chooses to meet are a matter for the Committee. They always have been and it is very likely that they always will be. There is nothing to prevent Committees from meeting at 9 am should they choose to do so. It is not part of my job to criticise them for when they choose to sit.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On the Scottish business that my right hon. Friend announced, could we have a cost estimate of the weekly wages paid out to contractors for all the joiners hacking away at the headquarters of the Church of Scotland up The Mound, preparing for a transitional Scottish Parliament? In the next two weeks, could there also be time for a debate on whether bombing—be it of Iraq, the El Shifa factory in Sudan or, heaven help us, Serbia—is counter-productive? Is she aware that a serious Slovak delegation is visiting London and that yesterday morning they conveyed to those of us who had discussions with them the idea that a bombing attack on Serbia would enrage not only the Serbs, but all the Slavs—and that we had better be extremely careful?

Mrs. Beckett: I fear that the costs of the Scottish Parliament are not a matter for me, nor can I find time for debate on them in the near future. With regard to my hon. Friend's question about the implications and aftermath of decisions to undertake military action such as bombing, such decisions are always difficult and cause problems as well as help to solve them. None of us has a monopoly of wisdom on how such matters are handled and I cannot find time for a debate on them next week.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): May we have a statement next week from the Minister for Small Firms, Trade and Industry, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Mr. Wills), on the filing of accounts and the submission of annual returns? Is the Leader of the House aware that I raise the matter because at Trade and Industry questions last week the hon. Gentleman said that every company with which he had been associated had always complied with the requirements of Companies House? Is she further aware that research has since shown that in three years—1987, 1988 and 1989—returns were filed respectively 11, 15 and 13 months late? In the light of the apparent conflict between the hon. Gentleman's answer last week and the evidence that has since emerged, does she agree that, for his good name and that of the Government, an urgent statement is required?

Mrs. Beckett: I fear that I certainly cannot find time for a debate on the matter and I doubt whether my hon. Friend is likely to be called to make a statement on it. I am not familiar with the facts that the hon. Gentleman relates, but we are all aware that businesses, particularly small businesses, sometimes have difficulties and overlook complying with certain deadlines. Indeed, it is within my memory that when the hon. Gentleman was employed by the Conservative party, the Conservative party itself was in breach of many such undertakings.

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): My right hon. Friend referred to the forthcoming debate on the Employment Relations Bill, which contains provisions for leave for family reasons. That is an important advance that my hon. Friends will welcome. However, the fact that it is unpaid leave will make it difficult for many low-paid workers to take up. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the Government consider the matter and that Ministers come to the debate with proposals or arrangements for payment or tax credit so that low-paid workers can take up their right?

Mrs. Beckett: I understand my hon. Friend's views on the matter and I am glad that he welcomes the Government's proposals. He is right that it is an important advance and a fresh step to extend rights to parental leave and in particular to create a right to protection against dismissal or detriment for claiming parental leave. However, at present the Government are unable to propose that such parental leave should be paid. Although of course I shall draw my hon. Friend's concerns to the attention of my right hon. and hon. Friends, I very much doubt that they will feel able to grant his request.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): Is the Leader of the House aware that last Sunday 22,000 people attended a rally and march in my constituency of Gosport to protest against the proposed closure of the Royal hospital, Haslar, the only remaining military hospital? Is she aware that there is the most profound concern in Gosport, Fareham and surrounding areas that there will be a loss of accident and emergency cover and other medical facilities and that lives will be lost? In view of that profound concern, will she find time for a debate on the subject, as it really cannot be allowed to escape parliamentary scrutiny?

Mrs. Beckett: I believe that the hon. Gentleman has, perfectly properly, taken several opportunities to raise that matter, and I am sure that he will continue to do so. In that sense, it could not be said that it is escaping parliamentary scrutiny. It is a matter for discussion between my right

hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Defence and for Health, and I am confident that those discussions are taking place.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden): Could my right hon. Friend find time in the next fortnight for a debate on the privatised utilities? As I am sure she is aware, there is now one regulator for both gas and electricity, but owing to the heavy legislative programme there will not be time for a new utilities Bill this Session. She may also be aware that I had the chance to raise the matter in the House yesterday during a debate on how some of my elderly constituents were being treated by London Electricity.

Despite condemnation by my hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Industry, London Electricity continues not to provide those elderly people with connections for their storage heaters. I imagine that many hon. Members face difficulties with the company, and I wonder whether my right hon. Friend could consider a debate on present and future frameworks for controlling privatised utilities.

Mrs. Beckett: I have heard of my hon. Friend's strong campaign on behalf of her constituents and I know that London Electricity says that it is now trying to resolve the situation. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a debate on that general matter in the near future, but I have little doubt that, with the ingenuity that she has shown so far, she will succeed in raising it as the opportunity arises.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): Bearing in mind the publication of the recent consultation on draft legislation on the Food Standards Agency and, more controversially, the proposals to fund it by a levy, will the Leader of the House make time available for a debate on the subject, so that the Special Select Committee that has been set up can be properly informed of the wider views of Members, who will no doubt reflect the serious concerns of every corner shop and village shop in the country, which will be faced with the extra charges?

Mrs. Beckett: I fear that the hon. Gentleman is entirely wrong, but I feel confident that he is acting mistakenly and not from malice. There is no reason why every corner shop in the land should be concerned about the levy, because it will not affect every corner shop in the land. Even for those that are affected, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said yesterday, the levy amounts to only £1.73 per premises per week; but it will not in any event apply to retail premises selling some wrapped food, for example, or indeed to food premises that are already exempt from registration and will continue to be so.

It is the intention that the proposals will be discussed with representatives of small business. The special Committee, which I hope the hon. Gentleman welcomes, will allow the measures to be scrutinised, and I do not see the need at present to provide further opportunity for a debate.

Ms Margaret Moran (Luton, South): Will my right hon. Friend find time for an urgent debate in the next fortnight on the import of illegal guns via the internet? She may not be aware that five stun guns were recently imported in that way and found in Bedfordshire; one has still not been discovered, posing a serious danger to my constituents. Given the growth of internet sales, will she find time to ensure that we have protection against the import of such illegal and dangerous armaments?

Mrs. Beckett: I was not familiar with that case, but my hon. Friend makes a very fair point. I fear that I cannot find time for a debate, but I will certainly undertake to draw her observations to the attention of my right hon. and hon. Friends in the Home Office.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): Will the Leader of the House, as a matter of courtesy to the House, examine column *302* of the *Hansard* report of 27 January 1999, where the Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food invites me to see the answer to my parliamentary question on the internet, at a very long and protracted address? For those of us for whom the internet is an unfathomable and obscure instrument, will the right hon. Lady consult the Clerks in the various Departments, as it would be better practice for Parliament that these answers should be fully recorded in *Hansard*? Those of us who struggle to operate a typewriter, let alone the internet, would rather see them set out correctly in the record.

Mrs. Beckett: I do sympathise with the hon. Gentleman. I concede that I deplored it when, under the previous Administration, agencies began to reply in ways that did not appear in *Hansard*, after which attempts were made to ensure that the information was fully available. I am not familiar with the issue that the hon. Gentleman raises, but I undertake to look at it.

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): May I refer my right hon. Friend to early-day motion 227?

[*That this House notes the remarks made by the Indonesian Defence Attaché, Colonel Halim Nawi on the Mark Thomas Show (Channel 4, 20th January) that British made military equipment, including Saladin and Saracen armoured vehicles, are currently being used in East Timor; and calls on the British Government to stop immediately all military exports to Indonesia until there has been a full investigation into the matter.*]

In that programme, Colonel Halim Nawi openly acknowledged the use of UK military equipment in East Timor. Would it be possible to find time for the House to debate the question of whether we ought to suspend all arms shipments to Indonesia until this matter has been fully investigated, given that that assertion had previously been denied by the Indonesians?

Mrs. Beckett: I did not hear of the report to which my hon. Friend refers. We are quite confident that no equipment licensed for export to Indonesia by this Government has been used for repression in East Timor. All such licences are looked at carefully, particularly when there is an identifiable risk that the equipment might be used for internal repression or aggression. I am not familiar with the remarks to which my hon. Friend refers, but I will draw his concerns to the attention of my right hon. and hon. Friends in the relevant Departments.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Can the Leader of the House reassure hon. Members that the absence of a single service day in the business announced for the next two weeks does not represent in any sense

[Mr. John Wilkinson]

a diminution of the Government's commitment to those important parliamentary occasions? In that connection, could we have an early debate on the Royal Navy, since Her Majesty's ships are poised in the Adriatic and the Gulf at a particularly critical time for international relations in both those theatres? Such a debate would give right hon. and hon. Members an early opportunity to express their admiration of the late Admiral of the Fleet, Lord Lewin—an admiration that was recorded in early day motion 253.

[*That this House expresses its appreciation for the life and service of Admiral of the Fleet the late Lord Lewin who by his example of outstanding devotion to duty in peace and war maintained the highest traditions of the Royal Navy and through his wise counsel and operational experience contributed so much to the liberation of the Falkland Islands in 1982.*]

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman will recall that it was only in the autumn that we held some of the service debates, and there is no suggestion whatever that the Government are in any way wishing to dispose of them. The fact that they are not taking place in the next couple of weeks merely reflects the pressure of business. Equally—and with the deepest respect for the late Lord Lewin and his contribution to this nation—I doubt whether Lord Lewin would have thought that the House should spend more time commemorating his passing than debating the future of the armed forces.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): May we have an urgent debate on the subject of blind trusts, as I am sure that the Prime Minister is keen to clear the air following the unfortunate resignations of the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) and the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson)? The Chancellor has agreed that the blind trust that funded his parliamentary office before the general election was funded by the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West, as was the home of the right hon. Member for Hartlepool.

We know from the Labour party's accounts that no money was given to the Labour party directly by the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West, but a large number of people who are now Cabinet Ministers—including the Prime Minister and the Leader of the House—had blind trusts. We would like to know, as would the country, what has gone on. The air could be cleared in a debate, and there could be full disclosure of the people who gave money to blind trusts to ensure that the Government came to power.

Mrs. Beckett: I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a debate on the matter in the near future, and the hon. Gentleman has shown clearly why such a debate would be completely unnecessary. The matters are under consideration by the proper House authorities. I am sure that he is aware—and I hope that he intended no implication otherwise—that all such arrangements, when they were set up, were cleared with the House authorities in the proper manner.

At that time, it was the strong advice of the House authorities and others to handle such matters in that way. That advice may be changing, and I am sure that everyone involved will take account of that. However, I note with some surprise that the Conservative party had recommended to the House authorities that blind trusts were the proper way to pursue such funding—so I really do not know why we should have a debate on the matter.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): On Saturday, large numbers of Britain's pig farmers descended on London to illustrate the crisis facing the industry. The problem is not that they have a poor product but that they cannot compete with imports from countries where cheaper foods are fed to pigs. Such foods are banned here. Moreover, husbandry techniques are allowed in those countries that would never be allowed in Britain now. The crisis is real and immediate: will the Leader of the House allow a debate on it?

Mrs. Beckett: I think that we are all very conscious of the difficulties faced by the pig industry. We have taken what action we can to help it through what I accept is a difficult period. I fear that I cannot promise a debate next week, but I can tell the hon. Gentleman that I always do my best to buy British bacon.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): Following the right hon. Lady's frankly callous and insensitive response to my hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) about the Government's proposals to impose a flat tax of £90 on all food shops in the country, will she reconsider whether the whole House should discuss the proposals? The shopkeepers in Bromsgrove find it completely unacceptable that they should have to pay the same amount as the out-of-town supermarkets, which have considerably more customers and make considerably greater profits.

We in Bromsgrove are very lucky in that many of our local communities—such as Rubery, Wythall, Hagley, Alvchurch, Aston Fields and others—have excellent local food shops where pensioners like to shop and which are the hub of their local areas. Those shops are already under severe pressure because of business rates and the competition from out-of-town shopping centres, and they regard the Government's proposals as disgraceful.

Mrs. Beckett: I am sorry if the hon. Lady feels that I have somehow hurt her feelings or those of the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes). Frankly, what she said was just plain silly. How can it be callous to set out the facts? Many small shops will not have anything to pay. In some cases, and for a variety of good reasons, even small shops that sell certain foods will be exempt. Such matters can be examined, and that is the purpose of the consultation. I hope that no Conservative Member will do anything to spread alarm and despondency among people who will not have to pay the charge.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): Will the Leader of the House consider arranging a debate in the next fortnight to consider the operation of the Criminal Justice (Terrorism and Conspiracy) Act 1998, which was passed last summer? That Act was thought to be sufficiently important for the House of Commons to be recalled in the recess, at considerable expense to the taxpayer. It was designed to ensure that people who use this country as a base to conspire to commit terrorist offences abroad could be brought to book. As far as I am aware, so far there has not been a single prosecution under that Act.

Friendly countries abroad must resent what they believe to be the use of this country as a place to plan conspiracies against them, and they will find it difficult to understand that, although Parliament underwent an emergency recall to pass the legislation, nothing has happened as a result. Should there not be a debate to examine that matter, which I think would be of interest to both sides of the House?

Mrs. Beckett: It is a little unusual to be asked to provide time for a debate because nothing has happened. Any credible information or intelligence that is received on the matter that the hon. Gentleman raises is fully investigated, and action would certainly be taken were any relevant evidence uncovered. However, I fear that I cannot respond to the hon. Gentleman's request for a debate on the matter in the near future.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): The Leader of the House announced that the Second Reading of the Employment Relations Bill would take place on 9 February. Will she find time before then for a debate that would set the Bill, which will impose yet further burdens on British business, in context? During the past few days there have been reports that 90 per cent. of British businesses would not consider starting up now if they faced the weight of legislative and regulatory burdens placed on them by the Government. The burdens on business have already increased by more than £5 billion since 1 May 1997.

Mrs. Beckett: I am afraid that I cannot find time for a debate in which the Conservative party could pursue the allegations it made throughout the general election, and with which it was so patently unsuccessful in frightening British business.

Point of Order

1.6 pm

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Would you say a word about the question put to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House by the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) about his being referred to a parliamentary answer on the internet? While I suspect that the relevant information might also have been made available in the Library, is it not also the case that the Library can secure information for a Member from the internet if a parliamentary answer refers to it?

The positive benefit of using the internet is that, for the first time, answers can be made available nation wide to any member of the public not only throughout the United Kingdom but across the world. The parliamentary answer given to the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is historically significant in beginning a process of opening up the House of Commons. I recognise that the Library has an important function for us, but the answer opens out information in a way that many of us would wish to welcome.

Madam Speaker: It is of course good to put answers to questions on the internet so that they may be available to a much wider audience. However, I take the view that answers should be printed in *Hansard* for us all to see. By all means, put information on the internet, but when a Member asks a question, I like to see the answer in *Hansard*.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. The relevant question asks for the publication of

"proceedings of his"—

that is, the Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food's—

"recent conference on the future of agriculture"—[*Official Report*, 27 January 1999; Vol. 324, c. *302*.]

It may be that the proceedings in question would have consumed the whole of *Hansard*. It may therefore have been totally impractical to place all the proceedings in *Hansard*.

Madam Speaker: We do not know if that is so, and it would have been helpful if the Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food had let us know whether the answer would have consumed the whole of *Hansard*. I need no argument about this matter on the Floor of the House: I want answers to be printed in *Hansard*. By all means let us publish to a wider reading audience through the internet, in addition to *Hansard*.

Orders of the Day

Social Security

1.8 pm

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): I beg to move,

That the draft Social Security (Contributions) (Re-rating and National Insurance Fund Payments) Order 1999, which was laid before this House on 13th January, be approved.

The House is being asked to consider a fourth order in addition to the uprating orders because an error in the main order shows the amount of benefit for widowers pension in industrial injuries benefits as £66.25, whereas the actual uprated amount is £66.75. The error will not affect the actual benefit paid. I apologise to the House, which I hope will approve the amended order. I am grateful to the Opposition who have, as far as I know, not objected to the late tabling of the fourth order.

I want to deal with the orders in four parts. First, I want to place them in the context of overall spending on social security, because the question of whether they are affordable will arise. Secondly, I shall deal with the uprating orders themselves. In general, most insurance benefits will increase in line with the retail prices index, at 3.2 per cent. Means-tested benefits will generally increase by 2.1 per cent., in the normal way. That is providing £3.7 billion of extra help for millions of people, including 1.5 million pensioners, and 6.5 million families with children.

Thirdly, I want to deal with the pensions uprating. Finally, I shall set out how we are improving the system for getting benefits to disabled people and people of working age.

The orders are affordable. They are part of our strategy to ensure work for those who can and to provide security for those who cannot. Our objective is to build an affordable social security system that meets the needs of the next 50 years, not those of post-war Britain, and that provides active help to get people into work and off benefit, and not only cash benefits.

We are doing this while maintaining prudent levels of public spending and tighter controls. Increasingly, we ask for more evidence before we pay awards and we are changing the culture of Benefits Agency staff, asking them to engage in active case management to ensure that benefits are right from the start and kept right throughout the duration of their payment.

We inherited a system characterised by spiralling costs and sometimes slack controls. Between 1979 and 1987, the Conservative Government spent no less than £43 billion more on social security while inequality, poverty and social exclusion increased dramatically. They were spending to treat the symptoms of failure, not its causes.

We inherited a situation where one in three children live in poverty, which is why we are introducing today a record increase in child benefit. One in five households of working age have no one in work, which is why we introduced the new deal. One in three people of working age risk retiring on means-tested benefit, and that is unacceptable. That is the reason for our pension reform, which I announced last December.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): Most of us agree with my right hon. Friend that it is appalling that one in three pensioners retire on to means-tested assistance, but will he confirm that, if his pensions reforms are implemented, 50 years hence, the proportion will fall only to one in four?

Mr. Darling: I read in some detail my right hon. Friend's article in *Pensions Week*, which has retained him as a pensions expert. We will debate pensions next week, when I will go far more into that subject. As he knows better than many in the House, predicting what will happen over the next 50 years involves many variables. The reforms that I announced last December will mean that far fewer people than at present will depend on means-tested benefits when they retire. My objective is to ensure that, as a matter of policy, if people work for their whole lives, they should be able to accrue a sufficient pension to retire on an income above the means-tested benefit. I know that he has particular difficulties with my proposals, just as I have with his. There is an honest difference of opinion, which will no doubt be explored at great length. I would have hoped that he would have supported our objective, which must be to reward work so that people retire with a pension above means-tested benefits.

Mr. Field: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Darling: Only once more, as the orders primarily deal with general social security benefit.

Mr. Field: My right hon. Friend said that we should reward people who have worked for the whole of their lives. No one disagrees with that. Why, then, are the capital limits not being increased by the orders?

Mr. Darling: My right hon. Friend has no doubt read the pensions Green Paper and knows that it explicitly states that we want to examine the capital and income limits on pensions. All hon. Members will agree that, above any other source of complaints, pensioners tell us that they have saved all their lives but are penalised for it while people without savings who have perhaps spent all their money are not. I want to stop that, which is why, both in the Green Paper and in exchanges on the Floor, I made it clear that the Government want to consider the matter. That reform is long overdue and I hope that he will support it. I repeat that the Government's strategy is to have a pensions policy designed to get people off means-tested benefits as far as possible. Of course, we must look after the poorest pensioners, who, through no fault of their own, may end up without enough money to retire.

We are controlling social security spending because we are determined to get people back into work. Our manifesto promised that we would cut the bills of economic and social failure. We have several schemes and measures, some before the House today, that will encourage people to get back into work. The single gateway, about which I will have more to say soon, will improve matters further.

Department of Social Security spending will grow by less than 2 per cent. during this Parliament, compared to 4 per cent. during the previous Parliament. That includes our investment in the working families tax credit. In the first year of the previous Parliament—under the previous Government—spending on social security rose by a

staggering 10 per cent. We have been able to control that spending. Unemployment has gone down—there are 400,000 more jobs in the economy than there were at the election—and unemployment has dropped by some 300,000. Moreover, because of our wider economic policies—the new economic stability, the new deals and making work pay—we are ensuring that we create the sort of economy that will encourage job development.

As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has repeatedly told the House, our objective is to achieve a new stability in a very unstable world, because we want people to invest in Britain and firmly believe that the best form of welfare is to get people into work. We must end a situation where people are almost consigned to a life on benefit dependency, as so many were during the 1980s. One sometimes thought that it was almost a matter of policy.

The new deal to get young and long-term unemployed people into work is making a significant contribution. Some 50 per cent. of those who leave the new deal find paid jobs. We have also invested £195 million in the new deal for disabled people, because the Government have a clear commitment to do far more than we have in the past to help disabled people, especially those who want to get into work.

Providing access to quality, affordable child care, with the first-ever national child care strategy, is an important part of that approach. So, too, is making work pay, with the introduction of the national minimum wage in April, and wider tax and benefit reforms. From April, nearly 2 million people will gain from the first national minimum wage—two thirds of them women on low wages.

From October, the new working families tax credit will guarantee low-paid families with a full-time worker a minimum income of £10,000 a year. It remains a surprise to the Government why the Tory party is committed to getting rid of the working families tax credit, which would mean a tax increase of some £17 a week for the poorest families. The disabled person's tax credit will provide a guaranteed minimum income of at least £150 a week for a single disabled person who moves from benefit to full-time work.

Before the House is an extremely important order, which cuts taxes for all employees who pay national insurance. It is worth nearly £70 a year to 20 million people. We are reducing the national insurance burden for employers, which is of particular importance. From April, employers will not pay contributions on the first £83 of their employees' weekly earnings—up from the current threshold of £64. That is a great help to employers, as is a further step that we are taking: we are simplifying national insurance for employers by replacing the current four rates for contributions with a single, unified rate of 12.2 per cent. for all earnings above the £83 a week earnings threshold.

We are also helping people with long-term illnesses and disabilities to get back to work by increasing the amount that people on incapacity benefit can earn from therapeutic work by a full £10 a week, rising to £58 a week.

All those measures are designed to make work pay, because we are determined to end the previous Government's poverty of opportunity, and end abuse of the system. We inherited a system that is, in many cases, wide open to fraud and error. We are taking action to root out benefit fraud and reduce error. We set up the benefit fraud inspectorate, and introduced a wider range of penalties to punish fraud. This week, I announced that we are stopping the Post Office sending housing benefit cheques to bogus addresses. When we trialled the procedure a short while ago, more than £200,000 was saved in just a month in two London boroughs.

We recently made £100 million available to help local authorities check the accuracy of housing benefit claims. The House is well aware that far too many mistakes—some error, some fraud—are made in housing benefit. However, it is clear that an effective fraud strategy must rid the system of two major flaws that we inherited: first, the system tempts councils to inflate the amount that they detect; and, secondly, it rewards detection and not prevention. The prevention of fraud is far more important that the previous Government thought. Detection is important, but prevention and being tough on the causes of fraud are just as important as dealing with its consequences.

It is worth noting that the National Audit Office report was very critical of the system that we inherited from the Tories, stating that the results suggested that, at best, there were high levels of error when claiming weekly benefit savings and, at worst, sharp practice by local authority staff. It did not surprise me when, a couple of weeks ago, one or two councils complained about our change of approach and that those councils were supported by the Conservative party. They must face the fact that the weekly benefit savings focuses attention on catching fraud once it has happened, and that sometimes that fraud is manufactured; it does not concentrate on preventing fraud in the first place.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): The right hon. Gentleman makes much of the changes. Does he not accept that it would be possible to enhance the detection of fraud once it has happened as well as preventing fraud? He seems to think that there is a gain in trading off one for the other. Surely, the point made in the newspaper articles is that he is putting at risk a saving of up to £200 million, but offering no targets for the amount that he will push off by getting rid of people's ideas about defrauding the system.

Mr. Darling: No, I am not saying that. As I have just said, I hope to set out soon our response to the Green Paper on fraud published by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) when he was Minister for Welfare Reform. We have finished our consultations on the document and shall publish our response shortly.

Targets are important, but it is even more important to have the right targets. I agree with the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) that detection is very important. We set up the benefit fraud inspectorate, which is proving to be very successful, but we believe that, in the past, not enough attention has been paid to preventing fraud in the first place. The hon. Gentleman will know, as will anyone who has studied social security for even a short time, that the nature of some benefits—the lack of gateways and the evidence that is asked for—make it easy, in some cases, for mistakes to be made. Sometimes, there is genuine error—perhaps people do not get around to saying that their circumstances have changed—but that is not always the

[Mr. Darling]

case. There was a recent case in which a person was quite open about having used the slackness in the incapacity benefit system to defraud the social security system of substantial sums. We must close such gateways and ensure that we concentrate on prevention as well as detection. It is possible to do both and that is the best way to tackle the problems.

The hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green asked about targets. The Government have to review the targets and when we are able to make an announcement, I hope that he and everyone else will be satisfied that we have a sufficiently wide range of targets, which deliver the goods in prevention and detection. As I said, we are determined to take action across the board to ensure that our public spending plans are prudent and affordable and that we bear down on fraud and error in the system. That is a very important part of our strategy.

The reason why we are controlling social security spending and ensuring that we have an affordable and manageable system is that we want to provide more money for pensioners, families with children and people with disabilities. I am committed to doing more for disabled people, as our proposals published last October made clear. From April 2001, we shall provide new help for the most severely disabled with the highest care needs through a new disability income guarantee, worth at least £128 a week for most single people and £169 a week for most couples. This year alone, through these orders, we shall spend £3.7 billion more, which includes a record increase in child benefit and more help for the poorest pensioners.

Some 6.5 million families will be better off because of the biggest-ever increase in child benefit. From April, it will rise by nearly £3 to £14.40 a week for the eldest child. That is part of our strategy for dealing with the appalling level of poverty among children, which we inherited. We shall put extra resources into tackling the causes of poverty, including the sure start programme, which is designed to help young children get a good start in life and to end the pernicious circle whereby someone born poor will work poor and die poor, if we do not do something about it.

We are also doing more for pensioners. The basic state pension will be increased to £66.75 a week for single people and £106.70 for couples. Our new pensioner minimum income guarantee will provide help for 1.5 million of the poorest pensioners. That will rise to at least £75 a week for single people and £116.60 for couples, which is nearly £5 a week extra for single pensioners and over £7 a week more for couples. As I said in reply to the intervention of my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead, we are determined to alleviate the difficulties faced by people who have a modest amount of capital or income in retirement.

Hon. Members must consider what else we are doing for pensioners. We have cut VAT on fuel and we have abolished the tax levy, which helps to reduce fuel costs. We are restoring free eye tests, which is appreciated by many pensioners. We are also helping with concessionary travel, which is also of great value, to help elderly people to get out and about.

In short, we are providing security for today's pensioners. As the Prime Minister said yesterday, in two years we have done a great deal, especially to deal with the plight of the poorest pensioners, but we fully accept that we want to do more in our overall strategy. We have announced our proposals for the long term. The royal commission on long-term care will report shortly and will no doubt make recommendations that the Government will want to study closely. We are as committed to helping today's elderly people as we are to ensuring that we plan for those in the future.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): As the Secretary of State will know, I welcome extra money for poorer pensioners, but I object to the pretence that there is a guarantee. We are told that, from April, pensioners will have a minimum income guarantee, which is a major new reform. Will the Secretary of State tell me where in the uprating orders that guarantee is mentioned, because I understand them to relate only to income support?

Mr. Darling: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the minimum pension guarantee is not statutorily defined, but it is a guarantee for the poorest pensioners who qualify for it—

Mr. Webb *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Darling: Of course it is. The hon. Gentleman should be aware of that. I read the article in the *Daily Mail* a couple of weeks ago, of which I assume that he was the author, in which he alleged that pensioners are worse off under Labour if one takes into account various factors, including the abolition of tax relief for private medical insurance, which I am not sure many pensioners have; mortgage tax relief, although, by their very nature, pensioners tend no longer to have mortgages, and the higher fuel duty, although, as one gets older, one tends to drive less. He included also the higher tobacco duty, and, although I concede that some pensioners smoke, I am not sure that they all smoke like chimneys. The hon. Gentleman lumped in council tax for good measure, ignoring council tax benefit.

By comparing and contrasting all those factors with our positive actions, which he acknowledged, on VAT on fuel and winter fuel payments and so on, he managed to work out that pensioners were £2 a year worse off.

Most people know that the Government have much more to do, but our commitment to all poor people, particularly pensioners, cannot be in doubt. The hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) should consider the Green Paper on pensions—I am not sure what the Liberal Democrat position on that document is—which proposes massive help for people on low earnings who, at present, would retire on means-tested benefit. That should be supported. No doubt, we shall return to that matter in the debate next week.

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): Is the Secretary of State saying—as I think I heard him say in reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb)—that everybody who is eligible for the minimum income guarantee will receive it or just that they have a right to receive it? What estimate has he made of the number of those who are eligible for the minimum income guarantee who will not receive it because they will not claim it for one reason or another?

Mr. Darling: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point. That is a problem. He will know that the Government

have been considering how we can ensure that pensioners who are entitled to benefit receive it. Last year, we carried out pilot studies to find out what we can do. There are complex reasons why pensioners do not take up their full entitlement. Some feel a stigma in doing so because they were brought up in an age when the concept of means testing was completely different from what we understand now.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): The means-testing is exactly the same.

Mr. Darling: I cannot let that pass. The hon. Gentleman, who speaks from the Front Bench for the Conservatives, has been critical of means-testing, as he has in previous debates. I should point out that, during the 18 years that the Conservatives were in government, means-tested benefits grew from 16 per cent. to 34 per cent. of the total. Perhaps we shall return to the matter next week. For good measure, and in case he wants to reply, I remind him that the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green wrote a book on the subject in 1993, in which he said that it would be undesirable to return to a system based on more collective social insurance. Their criticism is a little misplaced. I accept that, for those 18 years, the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) was, in effect, in opposition, too, so he may take a different line.

I return to the more serious point made by the Liberals. We are concerned to ensure that we get benefits into the hands of pensioners who are entitled to them. Perhaps we may return to this in the debate on pensions next week. I am glad that the Opposition have given the Government a chance to set out at greater length what we are doing for pensioners. The hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) might be interested to know what we are doing to encourage pensioners to make telephone claims. We are running a scheme to make pensioners in north London aware of their entitlement. They are being taken through their forms by staff at a call centre in Newcastle. We are finding that the response rate and pensioners appreciation are far greater than one would have imagined. More people are used to telephones; they find them less threatening and more user-friendly. Our staff are well trained.

I am determined to ensure that we move away from saying, "Yes, you have entitlement," but doing nothing about it. Where we provide an entitlement, we want people to take it up. To balance that, I am also determined to end the payment of benefits that should not be paid. The Liberals cannot have it both ways. We can do far more for those who need help provided that we ensure that gateways to the benefits system are tightened up, and we do not continue paying benefits when we have no need to do so. I know that Liberal Democrats do not accept the latter half of that approach, but I remind them that their penny on income tax has been stretched a great deal—even since the election.

We are modernising the benefits system to ensure that people get the benefits to which they are entitled. We are introducing a fairer benefit review for disabled people who receive disability living allowance, and introducing a radical new service to help people of working age get back to work.

I want to comment briefly on the national insurance recording system because hon. Members may ask whether the orders will affect it. The short answer is no. The problems with the national insurance recording system—NIRS 2—have rightly attracted much attention this week. I have endeavoured to keep hon. Members informed. I wrote to them on 11 September, since when matters have clearly moved on. We have kept the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee fully informed, and I and my colleagues answered written questions on 4 November and 18 January. There are problems with the project; there is no getting away from that. We inherited the project from the previous Government. The contract was signed in 1995, and I am afraid that we have to clear up the mess that has been left behind.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Given the nature of the problems, the number of letters on the subject that many hon. Members are receiving and the concern about what is going on, of which the Secretary of State will know, will he commit himself and his Department to making a statement on the matter in the next few weeks?

Mr. Darling: I must discuss the making of statements with colleagues. In the meantime, I undertake to write to hon. Members once I have gathered a little more information. I am very anxious to keep the House up to date. There is no doubt that many of our constituents will be concerned. They will have read newspaper reports on the subject, some of which are right and some of which are slightly off beam. There is clearly a problem.

The computer system is the largest in Europe; it was, perhaps, inevitable that problems would occur. There is no doubt that, if we could start again today, procurement and contingency arrangements would be rather different. We must clear up the mess. As soon as I became aware of the scale of the problems when I was appointed in July, I decided that the priority was to try to fix the system and get it right. I am very happy to keep the House informed. Perhaps, in the first instance, it would be appropriate to write to all hon. Members or to answer a parliamentary question, but, if there were overwhelming demand for a statement, I would not stand in the way.

We have done everything that we can to try to get the system operating properly. Significant progress has been made in the past few weeks, but undoubtedly it will be many months before the problem is completely resolved.

Mr. Duncan Smith: May I make a simple suggestion? Perhaps, even if the right hon. Gentleman undertakes to make a statement at some point, he would consider, from his Department's point of view, informing those who are eligible for a pension who are confused about the matter—perhaps by advertising campaign, to explain what is going on and to reassure everyone that they will get restitution. The letters that many hon. Members on both sides of the House are receiving reveal deep concern, without any knowledge.

Mr. Darling: I want to reflect on that. The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that it would be a major task to write to every pensioner, and unfortunately, in the development of that computer system, matters move on, sometimes fairly quickly—sometimes to our advantage, sometimes not. Any pensioner who has any doubts about how much they are getting may raise the matter with their local office.

[Mr. Darling]

We have taken great steps to ensure that we get the amount of pension as close to the right amount as possible. In most cases, the error will be not much more than a pound a week—sometimes a little more than that. If any pensioner is in hardship, there are provisions to meet that.

I reassure the House that the Government are fully aware of what the problem is, that we are trying to sort the matter out, and that we are taking steps to ensure that, when we take future decisions on procurement, we apply what we have learnt from the problems that have arisen.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Darling: I shall give way, but then I shall move on, because I sense that the House would like me to conclude before the sun goes down.

Mr. Leigh: Will the right hon. Gentleman remind the House how many pensioners have been affected by the breakdown in NIRS2? Will he say whether he is satisfied with the performance of Andersen Consulting—or would he rather not comment?

Mr. Darling: On the latter point, the hon. Gentleman will be aware that it is extremely unwise to discuss contractual matters and possible litigation across the Floor of the Chamber. In answer to his first—better—question, about 180,000 pensioners are currently affected. That is far too many, but it is inevitable because of the failure of the computer system to operate on time.

The previous Government entered into the contract. A year later, it was recognised that it would be problematic, but, unfortunately, the contingency plans that were developed were not foolproof. The current problems are being tackled, but I do not want hon. Members to be misled about this. Although the system is now starting to work satisfactorily, it will take some months to clear the backlog and to get things operating.

I am determined that one of the things that I shall do while I am Secretary of State is ensure that we overhaul and replace our information technology systems. That is essential if we are to deliver a first-class service. However, in my experience, the procurement of a large computer system has much in common with the purchase of a laptop computer; very often, when one switches the computer on, astonishingly, nothing seems to happen. That problem seems to be endemic to the entire industry.

Mr. Rendel *rose—*

Mr. Quentin Davies *rose—*

Mr. Darling: As the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford did not know that it was the Tories who signed the contract, I give way to him.

Mr. Davies: Indeed, I did know that the Tories signed the contract, but the fact is that the problems began a year ago and, for many months, the present Government, who have the responsibility, appear to have done nothing about it. The right hon. Gentleman has, correctly, taken a much more measured and less defiant tone on the subject than he has in previous pronouncements, but will he take the opportunity to apologise to the House for having, last September, very rashly said that the whole problem would be resolved in two weeks?

Mr. Darling: I may be wrong, but I am told that, when the hon. Gentleman went up to Newcastle, he managed to persuade Radio Newcastle to allow him into the studios. He seemed to be unaware at that time that it was his Government who had signed the contract. I am glad that he now accepts that.

As for the past year, the Government were aware that there were problems with the system. The view that I took on becoming Secretary of State was that it was important for us to do everything possible to get the computer operating properly. There have been substantial problems, which have been narrated at length. As regards my tone throughout, it was I who took the decision to write to hon. Members. The information in that letter of 11 September was the best advice that I had at the time.

Mr. Davies: Two weeks?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order.

Mr. Darling: Since then, a number of parliamentary questions have been answered. I caution the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford that, if he proceeds much further down that line, there are many other things that could be said about the history of the contract. He was in opposition to his party, but his colleagues may not like it.

Mr. Rendel *rose—*

Mr. Darling: No, I have given way to the hon. Gentleman. I shall move on, as I want to say a word about the benefit integrity project. In my statement to the House on 28 October, I said that we had come to the view that the project was not working satisfactorily. I can announce that the benefit integrity project will end on 31 March.

That will be replaced in April by a new system, which will ensure that people getting disability living allowance are receiving the benefit to which they are entitled. I am determined to see that the system will ensure that people get help if they need it, but I am equally determined to ensure that we end the situation that we inherited, where a third of the awards were being made in cases where there was no evidence to justify an award.

I am writing to all hon. Members today with details of the new arrangements. I shall continue to hold discussions with disability groups, in particular the Disability Benefit Forum, which has been of immense help to the Government with their disability policy. I am grateful to all who have served on the forum.

We want to ensure that our new system is sensitive, fair and effective. Our strategy to improve the benefit system includes the single gateway, with which I shall deal shortly. We want to bring about a radical change of culture in the Department. We want to ensure that benefits go to those who are entitled to them, and that the system

is robust. We want a radical service that will, for the first time, give everyone personalised work-focused advice delivered by his or her own personal adviser.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) *rose—*

Mr. Darling: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman, then, for the benefit of everyone else, I intend to sit down shortly afterwards.

Mr. Kirkwood: This is an important debate. The Secretary of State has made it clear that the Government's focus is to get people off benefit and into work. That has profound implications for the contributory principle in the national insurance scheme. I am afraid that the Government are making changes without looking at the context as a whole. The Select Committee on Social Security has agreed in principle to undertake a study of the matter. Will the Secretary of State make sure that Ministers and officials contribute to that debate, which may be to the benefit of the entire House?

Mr. Darling: Certainly, the Department will do everything that it can to co-operate with the Select Committee. As the hon. Gentleman knows, I am only too ready to co-operate with the Liberal party in discussing this or any other matter relating to my Department. He is right that an examination of those issues will be of immense importance in the next few years.

It is worth reflecting on the fact that the contributory principle now accounts for just over 40 per cent. of the benefit system. The downward trend has occurred over the years, as I pointed out to the Conservatives earlier. There are problems. Those who advocate a return to the contributory system as it was ignore the fact that, with the lower earnings limit, for example, a number of low-paid people were excluded from it.

Most of the contributory system for those of working age now pays for incapacity benefit. By no stretch of the imagination would that be the only thing that we would want to ensure against, if we were starting from scratch. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government have considered those matters in the long term. The pensions proposals that I announced last December are heavily dependent on the contributory principle, because we believe that people should be rewarded for a lifetime's work.

The hon. Gentleman will know that, through the new state second pension, we have done a great deal to reward work. Equally, we have increased child benefit, which is not a contributory benefit, but a universal benefit. We believe that it is important because it goes to children.

I certainly accept that the issues relating to people of working age need to be looked at. There is a balance to be struck on these matters, and we want to help those people who need to be helped most, but anyone who believes that simply going back to the old contributory principle is our salvation has failed to take account of the fact that the labour market has moved on in the past 50 years. I welcome the fact that the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) and his Committee are looking at that issue, and I am more than happy to co-operate with him.

Indeed, for the sake of completeness—and on the off-chance that the Conservatives are in the mood for some co-operation and some constructive thinking—I should be more than happy to speak to them as well, such is the broad-minded view of the Government on these matters.

This is a useful opportunity to discuss the matters raised in the orders. We are determined to do far more to change the whole culture of the welfare state and we want to get people into work, because we believe that work is the best possible means of achieving independence. I want to stop a situation where far too many people who could work do not have the opportunity and become dependent on benefits, with everything that that entails in social and economic terms.

At the same time, we want to help people in childhood—to ensure that they have the best possible opportunities—through support from the welfare system and the education system. We want to ensure that pensioners can retire with a decent level of income, and that was the main driver behind the pension proposals that I announced last December.

In respect of people of working age, the Government will announce over the next few weeks a number of steps on which people will look back and say, "That was the turning point when people's rights and responsibilities were rewritten." We will be able to do far more to provide opportunity and to deliver an enterprising economy, as well as a secure future, for those who can, quite rightly, look to the state to provide that. I commend the orders to the House.

1.47 pm

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): The Secretary of State set out to be brief, but his speech was dragged out for a bit longer than he anticipated. As he said, this is a low-key debate, but it is also wide ranging and has always been treated as such. We do not oppose the orders, for the obvious reason that many of the upratings and changes are vital for those who need the benefits. It is therefore important to consider the debate in the context of range—rather than specifics and too much detail—and to try to get to the bottom of what, exactly, the Government are about, now that we have had two years to look at this matter. Yet the one thing that the Secretary of State did not say much about was the famous pledge that the Prime Minister made before the election and continued to make not long after it. In April 1997, he said:

"As we get welfare bills down . . . then we can release more money into education and health and services where we really want them".

After the election, he went on to say:

"I have asked Ministers at the Department of Social Security"—

admittedly not the current Ministers—

"to look in detail as to how we can make far reaching reforms that tackle insecurity and poverty as well as reducing the social security bills".

I shall not spend a huge amount of time on this, but given the Secretary of State's—

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman is not on good ground.

Mr. Duncan Smith: I think that I am on good ground, and the right hon. Gentleman will find out just how much

[Mr. Duncan Smith]

good ground we are on today, because the Government set themselves a target and it is fair to measure them by it. I do not want to be churlish, and hon Members do not want to be too mean, but when someone is elected on a particular policy objective it is fair that people should know, each year, whether it is being met.

The Government carried out a huge spending review; indeed, the Secretary of State was the man responsible for that review, around which so much of the relevant measures are set. As we were told by the Prime Minister, the review was meant to reduce the cost of the social security spending, but we find, using the Government's form of accounting, that the rise over the three relevant years—three years towards the election—will be £37 billion.

We must not question whether that objective is good or bad, but whether that is exactly what the Government said. *[Interruption.]* No, from the Government's point of view. There is much in the review that is unnecessary, and we will deal with that in more detail later, but the Government disagree. They took on the Conservative Government's projections; the Secretary of State will remember that, because he considered them in his spending review.

The Conservative projections were for growth of £15 billion over the same period, but the Government's figure is £37 billion. The gap between the figures needs to be examined and set against the increases in health and education spending. After all, that spending was supposed to be increased as social security spending was due to be decreased.

Let us put some of the record straight in regard to the line that the Government inherited. In the financial year 1997-98, social security spending fell as a proportion of gross domestic product for the first time in a long period. That was the year in which Labour inherited total expenditure of 11.9 per cent. of gross domestic product. It followed four years of falling social security spending. The Secretary of State inherited a budget that was not climbing but falling, but the Government have managed to turn the position around and increase the budget.

We are talking about a massive increase. The Government will take the figure from 11.9 per cent. to about 13 per cent. before they leave office—and leave office they will: I feel certain of that, notwithstanding the temporary blip on the front page of today's edition of *The Times*. The wrong questions were clearly being asked.

The Secretary of State no longer refers to that basic failure, but we have referred to it. It is there, a badge by which the Government will be measured. The Government have failed so far, and they will fail in the future; but what underlies their failure? That is what I really want to talk about.

Mr. Webb: Anyone trying to be independent—as Liberal Democrats are, of course—in deciding which Government had spent more on social security would consider whole Parliaments, and would strip out the cyclical element. Picking different points in a cycle messes up such judgments. An independent assessor would not say that the first two years of a Labour Government did not count because that Government had been following Tory policies; they were in office, and they could have changed things. On the basis that I have described, every Tory Parliament since 1979 raised benefit spending more than this Labour Parliament will. Is that not true?

Mr. Duncan Smith: I do not disagree with that. I agree with the hon. Gentleman's point about cycles, but the point that I was making to the Secretary of State is that we were pressing down on social security spending, and that he therefore inherited a falling budget. That was the cycle in this instance. It is no good the Labour Government saying that they inherited a budget that was rising, which was inherent in what was said by the Secretary of State.

We can look all the way back to 1945, and see an inexorable rise in the budget, regardless of which party has been in government. During different cycles, the rise has been at different levels. That is what today's debate is all about. How can we deal with such a position, and how can we deal with the structure that has driven much of what has happened?

As I have said, when Labour came to office it set itself a specific target. The Prime Minister said, "We are going to cut social security spending", but the Secretary of State has to admit that the Government are not going to cut it. It will rise more rapidly than was predicted by the Conservative projections, which were examined independently by a number of bodies. That is the only point that I am making. The target is the Government's, and they must be measured against it. Does the Secretary of State accept that?

Mr. Darling: What the Prime Minister and the rest of us said was that we would cut the bills of economic failure, getting people who could work into work. We also made it clear that we wanted to do more for pensioners, that we wanted to do more to end child poverty—which is why we are increasing child benefit—and that we wanted to help people with disabilities. As the hon. Gentleman will see if he looks at the increased spending for the next few years, half of it will be devoted to pensions, about a quarter will be devoted to people with disabilities, and a bit less will be devoted to children.

We know that the hon. Gentleman wants to cut, indeed abolish, working families tax credit. If he believes that our spending is wrong—and, if he does not, he should not criticise it—will he tell us what he will cut? The leader of his party and the shadow Chancellor have said that they will cut social security spending. What are they going to cut?

Mr. Duncan Smith: That was a remarkable attempt to rejig the pledge. Let me repeat what I quoted earlier. The Prime Minister did not just say that the Government would transfer the money to deal with social ills. He clearly said:

"As we get welfare bills down . . . then we can release more money into education and health".

Later, he added:

"as well as reducing the social security bills".

I am not going to discuss whether such proposals are good or bad; we could debate that at length. *[Interruption.]* I have my views, but I am making a clear point. With respect, Labour Members are in government. The point of today's debate is to decide what the Government will do about that pledge.

I feel sorry for the Secretary of State. He has had to appear at the Dispatch Box yet again and pretend that none of this happened. The fact is, however, that the Government are raising social security spending by £37 billion a year. Does the Secretary of State disagree with that?

Mr. Darling: We are spending more on pensioners. We are spending more on child benefit—a record amount. We are able to do that for two reasons. First, we are maintaining prudent control of public spending overall and have set our spending for the next three years. People accept that that is the right thing to do—it is affordable and prudent. The only people who are against it are Conservative Members. Secondly, by examining social security spending that we think should be cut—for example, that spent on people on benefit who should be in work, or gateways to benefit that should be tightened—we will cut those bills. I repeat the point that, in this Parliament—the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) is right—the rate of growth of social security spending will be half that of the previous Parliament.

This is not an arcane debate. It is important to people because the amount that they get either in assistance to get into work, or from pensions and so on matters. Therefore, I repeat the question: if the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) intends to complain and moan about what we are doing, will he please tell us what spending he would cut? He must have a view on it. The Conservatives have been in opposition for nearly 20 months. Surely they have come to some view on the matter, other than that working families tax credit should be abolished.

Mr. Duncan Smith: It is a Labour pledge. The Secretary the State can do whatever else he likes, but he cannot wriggle off that hook. Labour said that it would cut social security. As we run towards the next election, we will make it clear to the British public that they cannot have it all ways as the Labour Government have pretended. They pretend that they can increase massively spending on social security, education, health and everything else without having to raise taxes. That is the critical issue. The Government are not telling the public the truth. That is what lies at the heart of the failure.

A much more important issue lies behind all that: why the Government will fail on all those objectives. What exactly drives the Government? What is their clear agenda? It is not quite what the Secretary of State laid out—there is a deeper subtext.

It is the Chancellor of the Exchequer's determination to change the social security system, using the idea that, at the top line, work solves all problems with regard to poverty. Behind that lies the other part of the equation, which the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), the Chairman of the Select Committee on Social Security, touched on: the growing level of means-testing. The explanation for that is that the Chancellor also has to focus on the bottom 10 per cent. He believes that that is the only way in which he can now direct the money. He cannot have it both ways, otherwise he will end up increasing spending even at a greater rate than the Government are about to do.

The Chancellor did not tell the public about that and Labour did not campaign on that at the election. I discovered something the other day quite by surprise. In 1993, when the Chancellor addressed the Labour party conference, he said:

"I want the next Labour Government to achieve what in 30 years of the welfare state has never been achieved. The end of the means test for our elderly people."

I want to examine to what extent anything he is doing runs anywhere near that process. As I have said, the Chairman of the Select Committee needs to think about that one. The man who was against means-testing, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field)—he is now sitting on the Benches behind the Secretary of State—was pushed out ultimately by the man who is for means-testing.

The criticisms by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead of that system and process have been widely publicised. He said in 1998:

"Means-testing penalises honesty, discourages work and harms thrift".

Let us analyse that and see exactly what is happening within the Government.

First, the Treasury takeover of the Contributions Agency deliberately fudges the connection and distinction between national insurance contributions and taxation. At present, we all know that two separate agencies collect tax and national insurance, but that takeover, notwithstanding the Government' assurances in the other place that it is just a functional step and tidies things up, is a deliberate step to eradicate any distinction. In brief, it is a short functional step towards sending the national insurance system into oblivion.

What comes next begins to make the case. It is the introduction of what the Secretary of State referred to as the minimum income guarantee for pensioners. I think that that is a misnomer; the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Northavon, picked that up. It is no such thing. It is an income support guarantee for pensioners, which is fundamentally different. That is another example of the Government running their misleading rhetoric well ahead of reality. They want pensioners to believe that they will all get an increase. As the Liberal Democrats have pointed out, that is not true. Pensioners are not that stupid. They know that this is about income support because they know what income support is all about. The Government are merely shifting the base to income support while freezing the level of the pension. They have increased the scope for means-testing, which, as the right hon. Member for Birkenhead has pointed out several times, is a mistake.

Another negative effect is that many pensioners will choose not to take the money. The Secretary of State mentioned this important issue. A significant number of pensioners whom we believe to be eligible—almost 1 million, I think—do not claim income support. Increasing the level of income support will merely chase the error. The Government will not solve the problem if they merely add to the aspect that pensioners do not like. Perhaps there is a reason for that. Perhaps they know that fewer people will take the benefit and are hoping to save money. The solution can surely only make matters worse.

Mr. Paul Goggins (Wythenshawe and Sale, East): I am trying to follow the hon. Gentleman's argument on means-testing. If he were ever to regain power—that is a separate debate—would he abolish means-testing?

Mr. Duncan Smith: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has received his brief to ask a question, because the

[Mr. Duncan Smith]

Secretary of State was worried that no one was intervening. I enjoy independent minds on both sides, but I question whether independence can be stretched in this case. The purpose of my speech today is to discuss the ills of means-testing. I believe that the extension of means-testing that the Secretary of State is carrying out is wrong and will damage the system.

Mr. Chris Pond (Gravesham) *rose—*

Mr. Duncan Smith: I want to press on with my point before I give way again.

Pensions Week said—

Mr. Darling: If the hon. Gentleman is saying that means-testing is wrong, is he repudiating the ideas that he set out in the pamphlet "Who Benefits?" that he and some of his hon. Friends published in 1993? He said that it would be difficult and undesirable

"to bring back an effective system of state assistance organised solely on collective social insurance lines."

Is he saying that the Tories would abolish all means-tested benefits if they returned to power? How on earth would they pay for that?

Mr. Duncan Smith: Those are absurd extrapolations, but as the Secretary of State has raised the issue I should like to talk about it. He should read the pamphlet, which I think was remarkably good. It dealt with the reorganisation and restructuring of the benefits system. Can it be focused on a means test or does the system have to be simplified so that it can be based more on eligibility rather than simply concentrating on means-testing? The pamphlet gives options both ways. My view is that extending means-testing is a mistake and will not solve the problems. As we approach the election, we shall make it clear how we shall rectify the problems.

Mr. Field: Is it not absurd to debate whether one side or the other is going to abolish means tests? Is not the crucial question whether the direction is to increase or reduce means-testing? I have a better question for the hon. Gentleman. Should the Conservatives get back into power, would the direction of their policy reduce or increase means-testing?

Mr. Duncan Smith: I accept that the objective is not to debate what happened two, three or four years ago. Looking ahead, my instinct is that we must learn from previous mistakes. Before I discuss the Government's actions, let me say that they have not learnt at all from such mistakes. In fact, there is a clear agenda that will take them straight back to the worst elements of the past 35 years. I want to learn from those mistakes and not return to agendas that have failed. I hope that I have answered the right hon. Gentleman's question.

Pensions Week calculated that after the minimum income guarantee is introduced next April, a married man who has saved up to £9,000 during his life will find that he has the same income in retirement as someone who receives the minimum pensions guarantee and who made no effort to save. The difference is that the first pensioner had to put aside some of his daily income and make that hard choice while the other person did not. That is one of the inequities of the Government's policy. It is the biggest road sign that points to the ultimate demise of the basic state pension and the gradual emergence of a fully means-tested system.

Before the Green Paper was published, the Government said, "Don't worry, wait for the Green Paper when all will become clear and all will be simplified." Yet the Green Paper offered absolutely nothing to the 10.7 million existing pensioners. *[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State says, "Rubbish", but I have spoken to many pensioners up and down the country and they all say the same thing. They say that behind closed doors Labour Members were telling pensioners not to worry and to trust them as they would restore the earnings link. They may not have said it publicly, but they certainly said it privately. Pensioners feel let down.

Labour told 10.7 million pensioners, "Wait for us", but, instead of rectifying the problem, they introduced the advance corporation tax dividend tax hike which has hurt so many. They had the opportunity to help out the 300,000 non-tax paying pensioners and the 80,000 other pensioners who will be hit by that measure, but they chose not to. I do not know whether the Secretary of State made representations to the Chancellor, but if he did, they were clearly not heeded. It strikes me that the pensions policy is yet another measure that forces people further down the income scale.

I do not want to spend much more time on the Green Paper on pensions because, as the Secretary of State said, we will have a debate on that next week when I intend to raise specific issues. However, it is worth noting that the Green Paper made a huge mess of pension provision which will progressively drive people down the income scale, and increase the numbers that are likely to fall onto income support. Most independent calculations are now beginning to show that.

For example, the Government's plans pose a real danger that employers will close their occupation schemes to new entrants and simply offer them access to a stakeholder scheme to which those employers make no contribution. Employees will therefore lose an element of future income. The Government's plans also attack salary-related occupational schemes, signalling the death-knell for such schemes. The confusion in the Government's proposals may encourage people to join stakeholder pensions that may not prove to be the cheapest or the best investment for them. All the talk about capital limits is part of the debate about perverse incentives on the margins of means-testing, which the Government seem unable to understand, or which they understand for the wrong reasons. As many papers said, the Government's plans tinker with the real problems rather than tackle them.

Let us consider the other factors that are linked to means-testing. Under the Government's new bereavement benefit, widows and widowers with no dependants will have their benefit withdrawn after six months despite the contributions having been paid. If that is not a severing of the contributions link, I do not know what is. The changes will mean that eventually many will be dumped onto means-tested benefits. The Secretary of State must know that because he indicated as much in his statement. He knows that the National Association of Widows said that it would like the state contributory principle to be upheld for future widows.

There is no question that the Government want to shift the child benefit system towards some form of means test, through taxation. The Secretary of State has not denied it. Government assurances on the matter ring hollow. Many mothers are now receiving forms through the post, asking exactly who is in the household and what the incomes are. The idea is to try to measure the household income. Big Brother is asking all those questions in order to be able to decide whether it is feasible to tax child benefit. The Government have said that they are thinking about doing that, and they are trying to find out some of the information en route.

When the Government first said that they would tax generally, the Institute for Fiscal Studies said:

"As the tax system currently stands, such a proposal would be very difficult to implement. The tax system needs to identify not just the recipient of the child benefit payment, but also the partner in the tax year who may be liable to tax on this payment. It would require the linking of the tax circumstances of all taxpayers with those of their partner. This would be particularly problematic for lower-and basic-rate PAYE taxpayers who currently do not make tax returns."

The Government's annual report clearly stated that they intended to go down that road. It said:

"we believe there is a case for higher rate taxpayers paying tax on Child Benefit if it is to be raised in the future."

The Government have raised it, so do they intend to tax it? The IFS said:

"The taxation of child benefit at the higher rate either raises almost no revenue or significantly increases the complexity of the tax system while raising relatively little revenue."

Do the Government intend to tax child benefit? The structure of the system seems to be moving.

Even worse is the side effect of going down that road on child benefit. For example, the IFS shows that about 90 per cent. of families with one earner and one partner staying at home looking after children would be losers. Of families with two earners, about 98 per cent. would be losers.

The IFS said:

"individuals would face a penalty for declaring cohabiting relationships involving children. As such without any further change we would expect fewer relationships to be declared."

In other words, people would be driven into further dependency elsewhere in the system, and there would be statutory single parents who might in reality not be single parents. People who are honest about their relationship and get married will be penalised in favour of another style of relationship. That shows the short-sightedness of the Government's proposals.

The IFS said:

"The second alternative is to question the principle behind independent taxation. This question is clearly raised by the taxation of child benefit as joint income."

The Government must clearly decide one way or the other.

The clear line running through the Government's proposals amounts to the extension of means-testing and the repetition of many of the mistakes that have been made over the past 30 years or so. Before the general election, the Prime Minister claimed that the Government would reduce the dependency culture but, as I think I have shown, they pursue an agenda of extending means-testing, which all hon. Members should agree drags people into dependency, not out of it. The working families tax credit increases dependency even more. The Treasury anticipated a 27 per cent. increase in claimants for the credit, which would increase the number claiming to about 400,000.

Means-testing encourages fraud and deception. That is pretty much established. In its manifesto, the Labour party promised to tackle fraud, yet the whole ethos of the change will make it worse. The manifesto said:

"Just as we owe it to the taxpayer to crack down on tax avoidance, so we must crack down on dishonesty in the benefit system."

One cannot do that if one increases the structure that creates fraud in the system. From WFTC onwards, there is an increasing agenda of fraud, and not one that is likely to fade away.

Most of all, the Government's programme attacks what I believe to be the nature of the family. It is becoming clear that the Government see work as the solution to all the problems and intend to drive through a vicious means-testing programme so that they can focus social security on the bottom 10 per cent. The policy is utterly flawed and flies in the face of the evidence on how best to deal with poverty in the community. The Government are in effect making war on families who are the greatest source of welfare provision and natural support for people in all income groups.

For example, Ruth Lister, a one-time member of Labour's Commission on Social Justice, congratulated the Government on a Budget that moves away from "supporting the family". She is right on that. The new Treasury Minister, the Economic Secretary, also claimed in a speech in 1996 that marriage "doesn't fit any more". A theme runs through most of the utterances of Labour Members.

The Government's policy decrees that natural structures are irrelevant and that work and children are all that matters. It is cloaked in a rhetoric that is meant to be all things to all people—very Clintonesque—and to disguise what it is really about. I predict that the policy will resolve nothing but simply make social breakdown worse, thus increasing dependency on the state, which will force up the cost of social security faster even than the expected rise over the next three years. It will put further burdens, through increased tax, on those on marginal incomes, and will drive them down into the benefit net.

The Government had the perfect opportunity to try to understand what has driven the dependency culture over so many years and, frankly, they have failed. They are still locked in an out-of-date extremist agenda that has at its heart the hatred of the family structures that would offer balance and economic viability. They will fail, I believe, as Labour Governments before them have done, but the saddest part is that it is not their failure but the failure of all of us. The future is not bright. The future is means-testing.

2.17 pm

Mrs. Joan Humble (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood): This debate is important because it matters to so many people in my constituency and throughout the country. They will welcome most of the proposals. I welcome the increase in child benefit. In reply to the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), I would say that, if there is one notable item supporting the family, it is that substantial increase.

[Mrs. Joan Humble]

For the first time, I will not be a beneficiary of the increase, so I can speak dispassionately.

Mr. Field: My hon. Friend should then declare a non-interest.

Mrs. Humble: I will not comment on my right hon. Friend's aside.

I welcome the guaranteed minimum income for pensioners, which is another important initiative that will have widespread support, but I want to concentrate on disability benefits. I am especially pleased that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State emphasised the fact that the Government's policy is based on a strategy of inclusion rather than exclusion, bringing people into the community, whether in paid work or as volunteers, and encouraging disabled people to see themselves as full members of our society. The many benefits under discussion are all part of that strategy.

I am especially pleased at the extension of the higher-rate mobility component of disability living allowance to three and four-year-olds. However, I have had approaches from disability groups who would like the benefit to be extended to children under the age of three. I would welcome any comments that my right hon. Friend might have on that.

I wish to refer to the wider issues of the DLA and the benefit integrity project. Many hon. Members in the Chamber will have heard heart-rending stories from constituents about their dreadful experiences with the BIP. Last January, my advice surgeries were full of people whose Christmas present was an immensely complicated form to fill in for the BIP. They did not understand it. They had been awarded a benefit, they thought, for life—but then they were told that it was not for life and would be taken away. That caused heartache, bewilderment and anger.

I was pleased last year when the Government introduced many changes to improve the operation of the BIP. However, we must realise that the BIP has failed and will be abolished. I look forward to receiving the letter to which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State referred, which details the changes and the new procedures. It will be important to look at the details of what will replace the BIP and how it will operate.

I have received complaints from constituents about the operation of the DLA and the BIP, but I represent Warbreck house in Blackpool—where the DLA has its headquarters. I visited Warbreck house to talk to the staff who implement all of the procedures, and I met people who were anxious to deliver a good service. They wanted to help those who were coming to them for a service. They did not like being portrayed as ogres who were somehow there simply to deny people a benefit or take it away from them.

Talking to the staff made it clear to me that they were looking to us as parliamentarians to provide a system that they can implement fairly, and which will deliver the service that all our constituents deserve. In looking at the replacement for the BIP, and how the DLA will be administered, I hope that the Secretary of State will be looking at training to ensure that members of staff know how to deal with people with disabilities—especially those who go into the homes of disabled people to talk over their benefits with them.

Those people have a difficult job. It is vital that, in assessing need, they get the assessment right, but, in so doing, they often find themselves asking intrusive questions to which people object. I am not saying that there is an easy answer, but we need to approach the issue with sensitivity and tact to get it right in the first place, so that there is less likelihood of people getting benefits to which they are not entitled, or not getting the full benefits that they deserve.

Mr. Webb: When the hon. Lady visited the DLA centre in Blackpool, did the staff express frustration at the length of time it takes for appeals on DLA decisions to be dealt with? My constituent, Mr. Price—about whom I have asked a written question today—had his money taken away four months ago and still has not heard.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must not put a constituent's case on the record during an intervention.

Mrs. Humble: There are concerns about getting information from doctors and others, and the whole system needs to be looked at so that my constituents and those of the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) all receive a decent service.

Although DLA is an important benefit, it is important to acknowledge that the welfare state is about more than social security benefits. When I meet disabled people, they often talk to me about the wider services that they receive from local authority social services departments and health authorities, because social services also assess people's needs and deliver services. Many councils are now taking advantage of the new system of direct payments.

I wish to raise the issue of joint working across departments. Welfare reform is not just about welfare benefits. It is about making sure that individuals—whether they are people with disabilities, families with children or elderly people—can access the whole range of services and support systems that they may need. The Government are keen on so-called joined-up government, and I hope that that means joined-up central and local government—and anybody else who can get involved—to provide total support.

Many local authorities currently offer one-stop shops for advice, and I would like to know whether the Government are looking at taking part in those initiatives so that benefits advice is available, together with other advice from other local authority departments.

Since I am keen on joint working, I was pleased to receive a letter from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, announcing that Blackpool is part of a new project as part of the invest-to-save strategy of the Treasury, which involves joint working. The council, the benefits agencies and the employment services will work together to facilitate the gateways to housing benefit and council tax benefit and to ensure that the processes are in place to counter fraud. *[Interruption.]* I hope that Opposition Front-Bench Members are listening because we are talking about an excellent Government initiative to counter fraud.

For the first time, there will be joint new claims-visiting teams and a one-stop central benefits information team. There will be joint training and very much more. It is exactly that sort of initiative that will help the Government to succeed in their welfare reform, but it will help also the recipients of the reform.

There is much to welcome in the regulations, and the in announcements today and over the past few months from the Government. There is still some way to go in delivering the proposals, but I am sure that more questions will be asked in the wider debate that must take place. I certainly welcome the announcements today.

2.27 pm

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): I am delighted to have a chance to take part in this important debate. There is a lot that we welcome in the statements today, and important upratings are being made. We certainly welcome the advances beyond the usual uprating in line with inflation that is taking place in some areas—particularly in child benefit. These are welcome increases in benefits that needed to be increased.

It is not my intention to spend a long time praising the Government today, and I hope that the Secretary of State will forgive me if most of what I say is to comment on the differences that my right hon. and hon. Friends have with the Government. It is important to use the time to try to persuade the Government about what we think they are getting wrong, and to persuade them to change their mind.

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman is making his leadership bid.

Mr. Rendel: I hope that there will be no more sedentary interventions such as that one, as they help neither me nor any of my colleagues.

Mr. Kirkwood: That is why he did it.

Mr. Rendel: I am sure.

We heard from the hon. Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) that the increase in child benefit will help some of the poorer families in the country. On the whole, families with children tend to be poorer than those who have no children. It is right, therefore, that we should look to child benefit as a way of using the benefits system and the welfare system to give a bit more money to those who need it more, rather than to those who need it less.

There are better ways of increasing child benefit than the Secretary of State is suggesting. Importantly, the families who are likely to be least well off are those where one or the other parent—or, in a single-parent family, the parent—decides to stay at home to look after their own children. The Liberal Democrats think it is important that that option should be available to those who choose it. Therefore, there is a good case to be made for doubling child benefit for the youngest child in a family that has a child under the age of five. It is primarily in families with a child of pre-school age that one of the parents will want to stay at home to look after that child.

We acknowledge that the Government are making changes that will help with child care, but I am less worried about families who need some form of child care to help them look after their children than about families in which one parent wants to stay at home to look after a child rather than go out to earn a living. I urge the Secretary of State to reconsider the policy that was adopted by the Liberal Democrats at our conference last year—that, in a family with at least one child under the age of five, child benefit should be doubled for the youngest child under that age.

If necessary, that could be paid for by taxing child benefit for families with at least one higher-rate taxpayer. I do not for a moment want the Secretary of State to think that this is yet another item to come out of our proposal for an increase of 1p on income tax. That proposal has nothing to do with the policy that I have described.

The second difference that I want to bring to the attention of the Secretary of State has to do with the minimum income guarantee, a matter that the right hon. Gentleman touched on briefly in his speech. However, all that is guaranteed is that everyone achieving pension age will be eligible to get a certain minimum income: it is not a guarantee that everyone will in fact get that income. In last Thursday's equivalent debate in the other place, the Under-Secretary, Baroness Hollis, made it clear that the pilot schemes investigating why pensioners on low incomes do not claim the income support to which they are entitled are finding that some of them do not claim simply because of the stigma associated with claiming.

I accept that the Secretary of State is doing his best to overcome the problem of stigma and to introduce pilot schemes to persuade people who have worked and paid national insurance contributions all their lives that it is their right, at the end of their lives, to have that income support to bring their incomes up to a minimum level. However, even if he does everything he can in that regard, a considerable number will still not make a claim and will be left with an income below what the Government accept is the minimum on which people can live.

In passing, I note that the Secretary of State did not, as I asked when I intervened in his opening speech, give me an estimate of the number of people who, even in future, will be living below what he calls his minimum income guarantee because, for whatever reason, they do not receive the income support for which they may be eligible. I hope that he will rectify that later.

The Secretary of State may suggest that no alternative plan exists for dealing with most of the very poorest pensioners, but I take this opportunity to remind him of an option that I hope he may take up in the near future. It was first proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb), and my party has since adopted it. My hon. Friend has proposed that pensions should include absolute guaranteed amounts of £5 for people over 80 and of £3 for people over 75. The present tiny increase available of 25p is simply irrelevant, given the amount of money those pensioners should get. The proposal would target some of the poorest of our pensioners without running into all the difficulties of means testing. I suggest that that would be a way around the Secretary of State's problem.

Thirdly, there is the matter of capital allowances, which the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) has raised already. Last week, in the equivalent debate in the other place, Baroness Hollis said that capital allowances caused some people who did not claim income support to live on incomes below the income support base level. She

[Mr. Rendel]

said that some people were ineligible to claim income support because they had too much capital somewhere in their savings.

It is true that many elderly people fervently believe that they have to keep a certain amount of capital set aside. For example, they may not want their families to have to meet their funeral expenses, they may want to pass the capital on to their children, or they may feel that they need to keep it for an even rainier day. People who are not prepared to spend their capital, for whatever reason, as a result have to live on a pension below income support levels and therefore below what the Government call a minimum living wage.

We should not allow that problem to get even worse by not making any increase in capital allowance. Some capital allowances have not been increased for 10 years, in which time living costs have gone up by about 50 per cent. It is quite wrong to restrict capital allowances in that way, which can only make worse all the difficulties inherent in means testing.

The fourth matter that I want to bring to the Secretary of State's attention is the benefit integrity project. The point has been made before, but I want to make it again. The Secretary of State said that the project had failed but he has decided to keep it going, even though no case can be made for doing so. He is right to look for a new and better scheme that could be introduced. It is very important to try to avoid potential fraud, and to ensure that people on benefit are reassessed so that they get all the benefit to which they are entitled. Such a reassessment will cause the amounts payable to rise as well as fall. However, there is no argument for keeping in place a system that the Secretary of State has already said has failed.

My fifth point concerns the national insurance recording system, NIRS2. The Secretary of State said, rightly, that he was determined that the lesson should be learned. He was also right to say that the lion's share of the blame for what has gone wrong with NIRS2 lies with the previous Conservative Government. The Government have inherited a fiasco and a mess and are doing their best to sort the problem out. It is taking a long time; in the early stages, Ministers were remarkably secretive about what had gone wrong and failed to estimate how long it would take to put it right. However, we should all be grateful that now, at least, they have started to do so.

I want to ask the Secretary of State about two specific difficulties that remain with what is happening under NIRS2. First, although the sums may not be very large, by the time the problem is fixed, some pensioners will have been underpaid for a year. Sadly, some of them will have died before any potential repayment can be made. What will happen in such cases? Will the repayment still be made to the estate? If not, what will happen to the money?

The second difficulty has to do with widows, and may be even more important. Widows who want to claim either widows' pension or retirement pension are asked to choose which they would prefer. They have to make up their minds as to which pension will benefit them more. Yet they are not given all the information that they need to make that choice. The facts are not available; the computer is not working and people cannot make the necessary calculations. However, they are being told that they must decide and that their decision, once made, is final and cannot be changed.

Because of the failure of the NIRS2 programme, widows in those circumstances cannot fairly be asked to judge which pension they should choose. I hope that the Secretary of State will assure the House that widows who make the wrong decision—through the Government's fault—and who are finally told what would have been in their best interests, will be allowed to change their minds and revert to the alternative option.

The Secretary of State may have seen the recently reported findings of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on what is happening in our society. The foundation points out that the inequality gap is widening. The number of people living in poverty, including children, is increasing year on year according to the most recent figures. Over the past year, the number of individuals on less than 50 per cent. of average income has increased. The number of 16 and 17-year-olds on hardship payments has also increased. There remains every indication of worsening poverty in every age group.

I am sad that the Government—contrary to what their voters and the Liberal Democrats would have expected—are often doing the least for the poorest. Let me give some examples. An uprating of £2.50 on child benefit will mean 10p less for those who receive the family premium on income support. Under NIRS2, the compensation because of the system's failure will go to those underpaid by more than £100, who are due more than £10 in compensation, but it will not be paid to those who are owed comparatively small sums: the poorest will do worst. Pensioners who are receiving income support and who are perhaps slightly better off than those who do not receive it will be given a big increase in their guaranteed income support, but those who do not receive income support will not receive that increase in their pensions.

Mothers who are trying to look after a child at home are no doubt less well off than those mothers who go out to work, but they will not receive the kind of help that the Liberal Democrats would give. Notoriously, help for lone parents is being reduced all the time, even though they are among the poorest of those who receive benefits.

Our policies are targeted on the least well off, and our targeting often does not involve means testing. That is a significant difference in our policy. The Government are making the same mistakes as the previous Government in trying to drive the poor into work, and in trying to do so by making poor people poorer, while believing that the right way in which to make rich people work more is to make them richer. I am very sad to see the Government making those mistakes.

2.43 pm

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston): Debates such as this provide a welcome opportunity to take a broad view of a subject. It is useful to remember that welfare reform encompasses whole strands of issues. The actual rate of benefit is significant, but it is part of a wider agenda.

When Labour came to Government, the status quo was clearly unacceptable, for two distinct reasons. First, the benefits system had grown in such a way that even if we intended to continue with the underlying philosophy,

the system itself had ceased to be able to deliver, and it needed modernisation. Benefit chimneys simply did not relate to each other, and the system was not viable.

Secondly, society had changed to such an extent since the major benefit reform that followed the second world war that many prevailing assumptions required to be challenged seriously. We needed to consider both the future and the current structure of the system. We had to think of claimants dependent on the system. Any change that we bring about must therefore be sensitive and gradual, but we must simultaneously look ahead to see how change will affect future generations.

Post-war changes in society were demographic, but the dynamics of society changed too. We all live longer now. That did not mean only that there were more people of a certain age. It meant that people aged 70 and 80 were no longer revered for their wisdom, because there were suddenly so many of them. Deference to such groups was changed because the composition of society changed. Retirement age was once safely assumed to be fixed. Indeed, we should remember that Beveridge assumed that people would live only a few years after reaching retirement age. That age is, however, no longer a proper base for policy making. To say that 60 or 65 is a fixed retirement point does not take us far in considering how people's working patterns have developed.

The debate about pensioners will become sterile unless clear distinctions are made about the needs of state pensioners and those who draw benefits who cannot effect any change in their circumstances. It is up to Government to provide a framework for those people, but merely to debate whether to upgrade the basic state pension by one means or another takes us little further forward, in that it does not deal with the comprehensive needs of pensioners.

For future generations, we must consider the needs of those who are in work and who can provide for themselves: the Government's role lies in providing a proper structure that will enable them to save for their retirement. We must distinguish between those people and part-timers, people who take career breaks and those who will never earn enough from their work to put away money for retirement. We must also consider the people who simply do not fit into the cash and taxation structure, such as carers. The needs of those different groups must be carefully separated out before we can press ahead. It is sad that the needs of different groups are often mixed up in debates such as this one, so that there is no coherent argument.

The Government have made a tremendously good start in trying to restructure welfare. I am extremely pleased by the way in which benefits agencies, employment services and local authorities are being brought to work together. That allows those organisations to focus once again on the needs of the people who are the system's beneficiaries.

However, we must also return to creating incentives for work instead of dependency. The working families tax credit, help with child care, and especially the national minimum wage are significant in that regard. Among the changes I most look forward to are the single gateways, the 12 pilot projects that will be monitored so that we can see whether they should go national. Those projects display a change of approach, from being passive and reactive to being proactive and enabling.

One issue is often ignored in welfare debates. If we wish to restore faith in the social security system, we must restore the faith of the beneficiaries and of those who work in the system. However, we must also restore the faith of those who pay for the system—the taxpayers. People are prepared to pay taxes only if they feel that they get value for money.

The social security system is most obviously financed through income tax, and it is interesting to consider who contributes most to that. The top 1 per cent. of taxpayers pay 20 per cent. of income tax, and the top 10 per cent. pay 48 per cent. of the yield. The next 40 per cent. pay a further 40 per cent. That leaves the bottom 50 per cent. of taxpayers contributing 12 per cent. of all income tax. There is considerable distortion in the system, but income tax is only one part of the funding.

International comparisons are often interesting, and I should like to draw attention to figures from Germany. I do not assume that Germany's rates are desirable, or that the United Kingdom should move towards them. My point is that we can have a system where people pay considerable amounts into the social security system while having faith in it and trusting it. The figures must be considered in that context.

Taxation as a percentage of gross domestic product in the United Kingdom and Germany is roughly the same. In Germany, it is 38 per cent., in the UK 36 per cent. However, on social security taxation as a percentage of tax revenue, in Germany, employees pay 17.6 per cent. and employers 20.5 per cent., compared with the UK, where employees pay 7.2 per cent. and employers 9.6 per cent. In the European context, that is very low.

When people think of our main sources of taxation revenue, they always think about income tax but forget taxes on consumption, but we raise about one fifth of our taxes from VAT. What are the knock-on effects of that? Why does it matter to social security? It matters significantly, because unless people have faith, and there is some transparency about the money that they put in so that they feel a right to draw on it when they are in need and the stigma of scrounging is reduced, we will not progress but will repeat the patterns of the past 30 years.

We should remember how income tax has progressively become a burden on lower income groups. It was not until the 1960s that families clearly below average income started paying income tax at all. At that point, income tax became an important factor in determining work incentives. Income tax rates matter when people decide whether it is appropriate to work. Taxation became a work disincentive in the 1960s. The resulting poverty and unemployment traps are one of our most intractable social problems, the result of 40 or 50 years of development. The working families tax credit is an important first step to breaking that vicious cycle.

I have a few words on national insurance contributions. I hope that the House is capable of intelligent debate, and that we can consider the upper earnings limit without Opposition Members jumping up to ask whether I advocate scrapping it; I do not. I am saying that we should intelligently consider national insurance contributions and the hypothecation argument in a social security context.

I have some basic facts. National insurance is levied at a flat rate of 10 per cent. for employed workers paying class 1 contributions. There is a slightly lower rate for those who have contracted out of SERPS, the state

[Ms Gisela Stuart]

earnings-related pension scheme. National insurance contributions affect work incentives and play an important role in the poverty and unemployment traps. Interestingly, the Thatcher Government were able to increase national insurance contributions step by step, while reducing income tax; it appeared that they had reduced the burden on working families when actually they had not. In 1979, national insurance contributions stood at 6.5 per cent.; by 1983–84, they were 9 per cent. The lower bands were restructured and by 1994, they were at 10 per cent. For many people, that eroded all their headline income tax rate gains.

The regressive aspects of national insurance contributions are most clearly shown by considering different income rates. Someone earning the average income of £20,000 a year will pay about 8.6 per cent. of his or her annual income. Before someone asks how it can be 8.6 per cent. when the rate is 10 per cent., I should explain that a lower rate is deducted on the first portion of income. For a very highly paid person earning £200,000, national insurance contributions are payable only up to the upper earnings limit of £25,220. The remaining £174,780 are not subject to national insurance contributions, which, for such people represent only 1.1 per cent. of their income. That is directly contrary to the principle embodied in income tax: as income rises, the percentage deduction should increase.

The Government have realised this and taken some steps to start to address the inequalities of national insurance contributions. All employees will benefit from the abolition of national insurance contributions below the lower earnings limit. It is interesting to consider why the Thatcher Government got away with such changes while making people think that they would be better off, when national insurance contributions are shown on pay slips just like basic income tax. The reason is that our taxation structure is not transparent or easily understood. If people do not know how they pay for the services that they should expect, confidence cannot be restored.

I want to discuss hypothecation, which is a tempting solution to that problem.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): Before the hon. Lady goes on to hypothecation, is she arguing that national insurance contributions should be subsumed into income tax?

Ms Stuart: No, I am arguing that we should have an honest, grown-up look at the way we collect tax revenue, whether by income tax, national insurance, VAT or corporate taxation. Any debate on how welfare is financed must equally consider how the Government collect revenues, of which national insurance is one. A big advantage of national insurance is that people think that they derive some direct benefit from it. They assume that it is a hypothecated tax. People assume that they pay into the national insurance fund and draw from the pot of money when they retire or require health services, whereas in fact it is a current fund. I do not advocate one solution or another, except to say that some honesty is required.

We must consider what is most appropriate. One could argue that an annual statement of national insurance contributions to every taxpayer would give them some input. That would be in line with the Government's proposals for a pensions contributions annual statement. That may help to restore faith. My basic argument is not about taxation but about how to restore faith among those who pay for social security and for the services that the state provides.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): Does the hon. Lady accept that the contributory principle whereby people make contributions towards the national insurance fund and receive a pension, such as SERPS, is deeply embedded in our national conscience? We believe in that as a country; it would be a pity to move away from it. All the contributions are listed, and one must have paid them to get a full pension. That is all more typical of insurance than of tax.

Ms Stuart: I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman. I am simply saying that the system needs to be more transparent so that people have a clearer idea of what they think they are paying for and what they can expect as a result. Unless that link is restored, we will never get away from people entitled to benefit being made to feel like scroungers. That is equally undesirable.

Mr. Mark Oaten (Winchester): I agree with much of what the hon. Lady says about the importance of transparency so that people understand what they are getting and where they are getting it from. Does she agree that an additional problem is that many of the services that people on benefit require are provided by local authorities? There is a double whammy of national cuts and increasing local cuts in many services. People do not care where services come from but they want to know why they are being generally cut.

Ms Stuart: The hon. Gentleman highlights a problem of transition. The Secretary of State for Health said that it would take time to turn the oil tanker round. Social security is not a tanker but an intricate web at the centre of which are the most vulnerable people. As we move to changes of service delivery and how that is financed, such tensions will appear. We must acknowledge that they occur and ask how we will deal them. I do not deny that such tensions are apparent. The Government are now setting the right framework and putting us on the right rails to move ahead.

May I draw the House's attention to my reservations about hypothecation? It is a tempting idea, which has been compared to taxation by numbers—a system in which one chooses what one wants to pay for. I am sure that, in areas such as health and education, the public would be happy to pay a hypothecated tax, but what happens with a hypothecated tax for improving conditions in prisons? That would not be terribly popular, but it is a nevertheless necessary function of the state. That is why it is inappropriate to cherry pick. However, there is a place for a form of hypothecation, as the Government have shown in their use of the windfall tax to finance the new deal. It is a question of horses for courses.

On NIRS2, the Government's task is significant. The previous Government signed the contracts and, when I was serving on the Social Security Select Committee we decided that new technology was needed and that the only way to go was forwards. The modernisation requirements are significant, but even more important is the need to

restore faith in the system, which will take much longer. The only way to restore faith is to restore the confidence of those who draw benefit, those who work in the system—we tend to forget the stress under which they work—and those who pay for it.

The Government have made a good start. We are reducing fraud significantly. The previous Government ignored the fact that it is no good simply to have initiatives that look at fraud in a targeted way through random sampling. The best way is to create a benefit structure that "designs fraud out". Checks should be made from the start to make fraud much more difficult. The Government are moving ahead on that—we have introduced a modernisation programme, single gateways and a national minimum wage, and national insurance contributions are to go down.

The thought with which I should like to leave the House is that, whenever we debate welfare reform, we must remember that this generation and future generations have distinct needs. The most delicate task is to ensure that current pensioners, disabled people and single mothers are looked after while we change the structure to provide for the next century. I look forward to watching the Government rise to that challenge.

3.3 pm

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): There was a high level of hope and expectation when the Government first came to office, 20 months ago. The reason for that related to a simple rule: if people want defence spending fundamentally reorganised—even rationalised or cut—it is easier to ask a Conservative Government to do it because they are considered to be in favour of defence and could not be accused of wanting to attack the military. The same argument applies to Labour Governments in terms of social security spending.

Both sides of the House have long been concerned about the ever-increasing cost of social security—both Front-Bench spokesmen rightly exchanged insults on that subject. However, social security spending has increased, is increasing and will continue to increase, and nothing that those on either side of the House can do will make a difference to that essential economic truth.

When it became inevitable that, sadly, we were to have a Labour Government, those of us interested in social security thought that a redeeming feature of the otherwise unmitigated disaster that was about to descend on our nation would be that a Labour Government could introduce the fundamental reforms in social security, which, for good political reasons, the previous Conservative Government could not introduce, especially given the fevered atmosphere of their last few years in office and their very small majority.

We were encouraged in that belief by the obviously senior position that the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) held in the counsels of the then Labour Opposition. Our faith was further reassured when he was the first Minister of State to be appointed, and when he was made a Privy Councillor on the very first weekend after the election. Although a junior Minister, he was clearly right in the centre of Government.

The problem that immediately became apparent was that the excellent ideas that the right hon. Gentleman was formulating in opposition, although absolutely correct from a philosophical point of view—that of trying to create responsibility in society—were impossible to achieve in the short term if the Prime Minister's other pledge was to be achieved. The right hon. Gentleman's pledge was to think the unthinkable; the other pledge was altogether more prosaic and had more influence with the electorate.

In "The Leader Interview" on 7 April 1997, the Prime Minister said:

> "As we get welfare bills down . . . then we can release more money into education and health".

That quotation was rightly thrown across the Dispatch Box by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition.

We now have a response from the Government: the Prime Minister did not mean that at all. Anyone who approaches those arguments rationally knows that it is impossible to reduce the social security bill, and anyone listening to the Prime Minister must have known that—we did. The Prime Minister was actually saying that we would increase the sum spent on social security, which is precisely the opposite to what he said on 7 April 1997. I cannot believe that the public were so gullible as to believe what they were told.

The Government's defence now is that they are less wicked than the Conservatives—that, although they are increasing the total sum spent in real terms on social security, as the Conservatives did, they are doing it in a slower and less wicked way. I accept that that would not have been an attractive quotation for "The Leader Interview".

Mr. Duncan Smith: Extending that logic, does my hon. Friend agree that the Prime Minister thought that, had he told the electorate that Labour would increase the cost of social security, he might have lost the election, which is why he did not do so?

Mr. Leigh: We have only to quote the Foreign Secretary. We know that the Prime Minister was prepared to sell his soul to win the last election; therefore, a minor juggling around with the levels of social security would presumably not have caused him a great deal of worry at the time.

Mr. Heald: Has my hon. Friend noticed that the Prime Minister talks a great deal about some of his proposed increases in spending but, funnily enough, not about those in social security? Although the increase of £37 billion is as much as the total of other increases, it is hidden away in the Red Book under "tax and accounting adjustments".

Mr. Leigh: I am glad that my hon. Friend makes that point. My hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) asked that question of the Secretary of State earlier in the debate. Did he not ask the Secretary of State to confirm that figure of £37 billion contained in the comprehensive spending review in the Red Book, to which my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) alluded? Intriguingly, no answer was received.

Mr. Duncan Smith: He did not deny it.

Mr. Leigh: As my hon. Friend reminds me, the Secretary of State did not deny it. However, as we are debating the operation of social security benefits, it would

[Mr. Leigh]

be nice to receive some information from the Minister who is to wind up the debate, as to whether we are quoting the right figure. Does the figure of £37 billion that the Opposition are quoting accord with reality? To save time, I should be happy to give way to the Minister now, if he wishes to intervene on that point.

Mr. Pond: Will the hon. Gentleman give way to me? I offer no challenge to my hon. Friend the Minister.

Mr. Leigh: Of course I will.

Mr. Pond: Will the hon. Gentleman give us some idea as to whether, after his discussions with the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), he believes that, if the Conservatives had openly told the electorate at the last election not only that they had dramatically increased social security spending and taxation, but that they had increased threefold the numbers of people in poverty, it would have made a good manifesto commitment?

Mr. Leigh: I do not know where the hon. Gentleman obtains his statistics. He has an honourable record, for which I give him credit, of speaking in the Chamber on behalf of those who are in poverty, but he is fundamentally mistaken in what he says. I am sure that he knows that I am prepared to be critical when necessary, but what actually happened under the previous Conservative Government was a massive increase in the wealth of the nation during 18 years of successful economic management, and all sections of the population benefited from that massive increase. However, he has made his point and will no doubt speak again later.

We have not yet received an answer to that crucial question about the £37 billion. It is the essence of our argument today and I should like to know more about it. Conservative Members have also made the point that the working families tax credit will increase the level of social security spending by £1.5 billion and I am not sure whether we have received a response to that, either when the Social Security Committee questioned Ministers on the point, or when the House debated working family tax credit earlier this week. It would be difficult for the Government to deny that figure of £1.5 billion, because it was originally given to the House by the then Financial Secretary, who is now the Paymaster General.

It would also be interesting to receive confirmation or denial of the percentage increase in social security that we are discussing today. My noble Friend Lord Higgins, who speaks on social security for the Opposition in the other place, referred to a figure of 10 per cent., but I have seen a figure of 11.5 per cent. Will the Minister confirm whether either figure is correct?

The right hon. Member for Birkenhead was correct in his earlier intervention. We cannot be absolutist in the matter of abolishing means-testing in the system. We all know that no Government can abolish it, whatever we want to achieve. However, the right hon. Gentleman was right to frame his question in the moderate way that he did, because it is true that neither a Labour nor a Conservative Government can abolish means-testing, but in which direction are we moving? Are we moving away, however gradually, from means-testing while fully understanding the political difficulties involved in doing so?

We all know that huge difficulties are inherent in the thinking of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead, in terms of a short-term increase in public spending. We understand that and, as politicians who deal with political realities, we also understand the difficulties that the views for which he argued privately when he was a member of the Government posed to the Treasury's correct short-term priority of keeping public spending under control. We know about the difficulties, but the answer to his question was not received. There might be an answer in the Minister's file.

Mr. Duncan Smith: I gave an answer.

Mr. Leigh: My hon. Friend gave an answer, but, sadly, he does not speak for the Government.

The questions are simple. The first is about that £37 billion and the second is about the direction in which we are moving. Are the Government, in real terms, gradually managing to solve the problem, however slowly; or is our basic charge correct—that they are doing the reverse and actually increasing means-testing in the system?

After the Secretary of State last came to the House to give a statement on pension reform and welfare reform generally, it became clear—especially from press comment which was united on the point—that we now have a Secretary of State who is not committed to root-and-branch reform, but is committed to the re-election of the Labour Government, who is not committed to thinking the unthinkable, but is committed to tinkering with the system. That is the type of Secretary of State that we have and, no doubt for that reason, he will be very successful, but I doubt whether he will be successful in getting to grips with the fundamental problems of the system.

Mr. Heald: Does my hon. Friend share my concern about the concept of a minimum pension guarantee? If the level of the basic state pension is not increased, the Government can say, "Oh well, all the poorest pensioners are being protected by the minimum pension guarantee." However, over a period of time, the contributory universal benefit that we all value so much will be changed into a system of means-testing. Does my hon. Friend agree that that would be a major step down a road that he and I do not want the country to go down?

Mr. Leigh: I was coming to that point, which is the fundamental one that we want to put across in the debate: the concept of a minimum income guarantee is uniquely dangerous to the contributory principle.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green has made clear, what is on offer is not a minimum income guarantee. It is not a guarantee, because it is not something that one receives, whatever one's level of contributions or however much effort one has put into one's working life. It is simply a guarantee that no pensioner's income, whatever his past record of contributions, will fall below £75 a week. It does not take a genius to recognise immediately that that will result in a massive disincentive to those on low incomes to take out any form of second pension provision.

For that reason, it would be extremely dangerous and bad financial advice to those on relatively low incomes to take out such provision, because, whatever they did, they would always be supported by the state and given that £75. We are going down a dangerous road.

Before my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) intervened, I was coming to the subject of child benefit. The Government, in this and other debates, have made much of what they hope to achieve with child benefit. We have heard little in this debate about it, although we shall hear bad news on the subject in the Budget, but the Government are determined to tax child benefit. The Social Security Committee did some interesting research—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry, I missed that remark. If hon. Members want to intervene, I am always willing to give way. There is little doubt that the Chancellor will tax child benefit in the Budget. The Select Committee's inquiry into that and the worries of all the members of the Committee should be given credence by the Government.

The problem is simple. We all recognise that it may be inequitable for people to receive the same level of child benefit, whatever their income, and we may accept that as a point of principle or a first point from which to argue. We may accept that the Government should concentrate help on those least able to afford to look after children. It is dangerous to accept that because it immediately leads us on to means-testing. The right hon. Member for Birkenhead has been arguing that for years. What will be the effect of all that?

We tax the individual or we tax the family. We were told that, if the Government tax the individual, they receive a derisory amount, and, if they tax the family, they attack the principle of independent taxation. I suggested a practical example during the Select Committee's inquiries. I am worried about typical families, living in London, earning £31,000 a year and therefore paying the higher rate of income tax, who may find that their child benefit is taxed after the March Budget. Such families do not, in London terms, earn generous salaries. Why should they be taxed extra? Why should the burden fall on them? We all know the cost of housing in London. Why should a married man in London, perhaps with four children, be more highly taxed than someone living in London who has no children at all?

I cannot, for the life of me, see any justification in taxing child benefit unless the Government are prepared to say that they will tax only individuals, not families.

Mr. Christopher Fraser (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): Does my hon. Friend agree that, before the general election, page 25 of the Labour manifest said:

"We will uphold family life as the most secure means of bringing up our children. Families are the core of our society",

and that penalising families as the Government are doing flies in the face of that commitment?

Mr. Leigh: I hope that the Labour party meant that when it included that statement in its manifesto. I repeat that no one who has come before the Select Committee or who has tried seriously and objectively to deal with the issue has found any justification for taxing the child benefit of families.

Mr. Pond: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Leigh: I shall. No doubt, the hon. Gentleman will give me that justification.

Mr. Pond: It is useful to have this debate. No decisions have been made, and the Chancellor has said that it is sensible to have the debate. Does the hon. Gentleman not understand that his suggestion that, if the change were made, families with children would be more highly taxed than those with none misses the point that families with children receive child benefit, whereas those with none do not? There has been an historic increase in child benefit.

Mr. Leigh: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for saying that his argument is semantic. Child benefit replaced a tax allowance. The hon. Gentleman is the proud father of a beautiful young daughter, whom I know he spends much time looking after, so he knows perfectly well that children represent a real cost, way above the amount given in child benefit.

Mr. Duncan Smith: The main point that Labour Members are deliberately missing, which I hope my hon. Friend will address, is one that I put to the Government, although I received no answer. It is that, as the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said, the proposals could lead to a significant problem because those who are honest and open about their relationships will be taxed, but those who hide their relationships and pretend to be single parents although someone else is sharing their income will not suffer. That penalises the family structure and benefits those who abuse it.

Mr. Leigh: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. I could not help noticing that, when he made that point earlier in the debate, the Secretary of State was giggling. I do not want to do him a disservice. He was giggling not because he does not think that the subject is serious but because he thought that my hon. Friend was making an idiotic point because of course no one would be dissuaded from marriage by the level of a little benefit.

Have we not, in the past 50 years of the welfare state, learnt the lesson that, bit by bit, the structure of the welfare state and its benefits has an impact on behaviour, particularly for people who, for whatever reason, do not earn much money? When we discussed the issue in the Select Committee, nobody was able to give a satisfactory answer as to how the measures would affect cohabitees as opposed to married couples, as my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green pointed out.

We are making a justifiable point. We should not only argue that the measures are an attack on independent taxation, although that is a good reason for not proceeding with them. The better arguments are those adduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green.

Again and again, in the Select Committee and in an intervention in the debate earlier this week on the working families tax credit, I made a point to which I still await a response. Perhaps I shall receive one during the Minister's summing-up. My point is that the working families tax credit will inevitably be an attack on the classic Beveridge family of two married parents only one of whom is an earner. The proposal will encourage cohabitation or it will encourage both partners to be earners. Women should have the right to work and they should also have the right to stay at home and look after their children. That is what they want. There has been no response to that important point, which needs to be made again and again.

I shall move on to the wider issue of the NIRS2 computer, which disturbingly, we have heard today, affects 180,000 pensioners. The Government's basic

[Mr. Leigh]

defence seems to be that the problems are all the fault of the previous Conservative Government, who introduced the computer, and should have foreseen the problems. It is true that the computer was introduced by the Conservative Government. The bid made by Andersen Consulting was £60 million cheaper than the next bid. Although the Secretary of State cannot criticise Andersen Consulting, I, as a Back Bencher, am entitled to ask why the company undertook the project. Could not an organisation employing 40,000 people worldwide have appreciated that the NIRS2 computer is the most complex in the world?

The Secretary of State's defence is fundamentally flawed for one reason. I have obtained from the Vote Office the 46th report of the Committee of Public Accounts which deals with the NIRS2 computer and was published in June 1998. The Committee said:

"We are very concerned that the implementation of the new system is already nearly 18 months behind the date agreed . . . and that the Agency face an immense task catching up with their operations".

It recommended that the agency should

"draw up contingency plans to cover the risk that delivery of the system would be delayed."

If that report was published in June, what contingency plans were made by the Department of Social Security, the agency or other Departments in response to the Public Accounts Committee's suggestion? That report sheds a worrying light on what is happening inside government. The way in which such contracts are entered into is worrying, too.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Perhaps the hon. Member could mention such matters in passing. We must remember that there are several specific matters before us. I understand him asking the Minister about contingency plans, but going into a Select Committee report is for another day.

Mr. Leigh: I am coming to the end of those remarks, although, in defence, I should say that the Secretary of State introduced the issue. However, I accept your strictures, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and shall move to a different matter.

On the means-testing of incapacity benefit, which is central to this debate, Lord Ashley said:

"The attack on occupational pensions is disturbing. It will hit disabled people very hard and we should make every effort to persuade the Government to change it."

Sally Greengrass of Age Concern said:

"Penalising savers will not encourage prudent planning or saving in the future."

I mention those points because little has been said about the means-testing of incapacity benefit. The Minister's response to those comments would be interesting.

Mr. Webb: The hon. Gentleman will recall that the Conservatives means-tested invalidity benefit against occupational pensions—not if someone had more than £50, as the present Government propose, but from the first pound. Did he accept and welcome that precedent?

Mr. Leigh: The hon. Gentleman once again returns to the previous Conservative Government's record. I had hoped that I had made it clear that neither Government's record on means-testing is as welcome as it should be. I also acknowledged—I hope positively—the political pressures on both Governments. Of course I accept that there was means-testing under the previous Conservative Government. I was making the point that what the previous Government did is not of interest to the House. That is history; we cannot put that toothpaste back in the tube. We are interested in what will happen in future. We want to know the Government's plans. Are they intending to increase means-testing generally? What is their response to Age Concern? How can they expect old people to act prudently if means-testing is increased?

The Select Committee also did considerable work on the issue of the benefit integrity project. We received various assurances; the Government told us that it will be replaced with a "fair and sensitive system". We still await an answer from the Government on which "fair and sensitive system" will replace BIP. I have asked Ministers again and again—I have not received an answer, for I fear that no answer can be given. How they can replace BIP with a "fair and sensitive system" but at the same time attack the concept of lifetime awards?

Lifetime awards, on which I have asked Ministers questions, are fundamentally wrong. The Government appear to agree with me that the system is open to abuse. Does that not therefore mean that we must go to disabled people again and again to ask very detailed questions—intrusive questions, questions that will be resented, and questions on forms that may run to many pages? How can we get rid of the system of lifetime awards yet still reassure disabled people that we will not ask over-intrusive questions or put them under stress? I wish that I knew the answer. Luckily, I am not in government. Such an answer would be interesting.

The Government have met their responsibility to upgrade all benefits in line with inflation, which is no mean achievement—it was achieved, too, by the previous Conservative Government, although not by the previous Labour Government, who governed in altogether more difficult economic circumstances—but, what the Government have achieved is not enough. They are simply fulfilling their fundamental duty to the less privileged and the deprived. We on the Conservative Benches were hoping for something far more exciting, such as a fundamental attack on dependency. We were hoping that the new Prime Minister had some creative plans to take people out of dependency and into work. Although the Government will of course reply that they have all sorts of plans and ideas for doing so, very little progress is being made on the ground as a result of the Budget. That is very sad indeed.

3.35 pm

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): I am very grateful for the opportunity to speak in today's debate, especially because I know that so many of the changes that we are making—I am thinking of changes to child benefit and pensions and of people who pay class 1 national insurance contributions—will make a real difference to many of my constituents who are low paid, living in poverty or unemployed. Many are living like that because of the previous Tory Government's policies.

I want to make points about class 2 national insurance contributions because I am very concerned about the circumstances of several constituents who have made

representations to me. I can perhaps best illustrate my concerns by referring to the case of Donald Smith, a constituent who lives in Edenthorpe, in Doncaster. Mr. Smith is 36-years-old. About two and a half years ago, he was made redundant from the railway industry in which he had worked for 17 years. He went to work for another company, which insisted that he did so under self-employed status. The company refused to pay his tax and national insurance contributions. Mr. Smith was concerned about that, so he went to the Contributions Agency. Although staff were dubious about whether he should be considered self-employed, he was told that he should pay his contributions, and that he could protect himself by paying class 2 and class 4 contributions, which would entitle him to retirement pension, widow's benefit and incapacity benefit.

Mr. Smith was made redundant once again, but then secured employment in the railway industry—this time on a temporary contract—with a company that paid his national insurance and tax contributions from November 1997 to August 1998. During that time, he paid class 1 national insurance contributions. However, Mr. Smith was made redundant again following a takeover. When he went to the job centre, he was told that, because he had had a period of self-employment during the previous two tax years and his partner, with whom he lives, earns £13,000 a year—even though they are taxed separately—he was not entitled to either non-means-tested or means-tested jobseeker's allowance. Despite the fact that, for the previous 11 months, Mr. Smith and his employer had been paying class 1 national insurance contributions, he was not entitled to any jobseeker's allowance. Therefore his recent period of employment did not really make a difference.

If Mr. Smith had been paying, and had previously paid, class 1 contributions, and if the company that he had worked for had done the best by him and employed him properly, he would have received about £1,300 in jobseeker's allowance had he remained unemployed for a full six months. Instead, he received nothing.

Mr. Smith expressed his opinion to me bluntly. He felt that he would have been better off if he had not taken the job for which he was forced to become self-employed. He took it, but then felt severely penalised by the system and felt that the contributions that he had paid for the past 10 months—and for the 17 years previous to that period of self-employment—provided him with no help when he needed it. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) has already spoken about the need for people to feel that they will get something out of the system that they pay into when they need assistance.

I have made inquiries of the Contributions Agency. I was told that, even if Mr. Smith had offered to pay his own national insurance contributions to class 1 level, plus the equivalent of his employer's contributions, he would not have been allowed to do so, because the system does not allow for that. Once a person is self-employed, he is classified as such, and that is that.

I strongly believe that the present system, as it relates to self-employment class 2 contributions, is designed for a time when employment patterns were completely different—when self-employed people were more likely to be business men who might make provision for a business failure or for times of unemployment. A person such as Mr. Smith, who, 30 years ago, might have expected to continue working in the railway industry—or another traditional industry, such as mining—throughout his life, would not expect to be considered self-employed.

In 1950, there were about 1.5 million self-employed workers in Britain; by 1995, there were 3.5 million. The Government constantly point out that work patterns have changed in the past 50 years, which is true. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said earlier, Government policies are beginning to respond to that change. All the efforts to modernise the welfare and benefits system recognise that people may have one or more, or many, different careers in their life. To maintain a lifetime of work, a person may be employed, then self-employed, then want to return to employed status. The thrust of the Government's strategy is to ensure that the benefits system is designed to allow people to return to work with the maximum incentives, and to preserve their benefit entitlement, where that is reasonable. That is especially obvious in the changes that are being made for people with disabilities, which my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) mentioned.

Even in the recent White Paper on competitiveness, we said that we should not encourage failure, but should encourage enterprise. However, for people such as Mr. Smith, the current system works against that objective. Because of the effect of the class 2 contributions, the system creates a built-in disincentive for the unemployed or those unemployed who have been self-employed, who may ask themselves, "Shall I become self-employed if a job comes up?"

Might Ministers consider the possibility of designing a system in which a self-employed person could pay a third level of contributions instead of, or in addition to, class 4 and class 2 contributions? Those who paid that third level could secure themselves against future unemployment and know that, by doing so—by topping up what they were paying—they could be assured that they could benefit from jobseeker's allowance if their self-employment happened to cease.

I know that many people are affected by the problem that Mr. Smith experienced—especially when employers refuse to take on people unless they agree to work on a self-employed basis. Recently, the Inland Revenue issued guidelines to ensure that employers treat workers as employees when, to all intents and purposes, they are obviously employed. The guidelines were aimed especially at the construction industry, but the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union is worried that the Revenue does not always pursue as vigorously as possible complaints that are made about companies that do not adhere to the guidelines, and which effectively make employees stick with class 2 contributions. That means that they have no security if they are made unemployed.

The AEEU has estimated that the cost to the Exchequer of companies avoiding paying national insurance contributions is about £1.2 billion a year. Would the Minister tell me, either today or in writing, whether the new guidelines have succeeded in placing employees on a proper footing regarding national insurance cover? How many companies have had action taken against them by the Inland Revenue when they were found to be in breach of guidelines? How many complaints have been made about companies in that regard?

[Ms Rosie Winterton]

I welcome many of the upratings that we are discussing. I believe that they will make a real difference to many people in my constituency. However, I have worries about class 2 contributions, and I believe that we need to ensure that the system is fair to people who pay those contributions. We must also ensure that employers do not force people to pay class 2 contributions by insisting that they work as self-employed. We must ensure that the Exchequer does not lose out because companies avoid following the Revenue guidelines. I know from discussions with Ministers that they are aware of the problems which I have outlined. I hope that they will be considered sympathetically to ensure that, in future, the system is fair and equitable for all.

3.49 pm

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton). I listened to her speech with interest. She is right to point out some of the difficulties in the fine print of the class 2 and class 4 contribution systems for the self-employed. In the future we need to focus on the self-employed as a class to make sure that the inequities do not continue. Injustices do exist, and people have a poor understanding of what they are entitled to in return for the money that they are contributing.

Perhaps I can engage the hon. Lady's interest in trying to help me to stimulate a full-scale debate on the future of the contributory principle. The argument that she advanced so concisely and cogently is part of that wider strategic debate. I look forward to reading her speech as evidence to that end.

This is a valuable debate. I point out to the business managers that for other aspects of public policy—for example, defence estimates—there are allocated days on which the House considers overall expenditure in that area. We are lucky that the Chair allows us a fair degree of latitude. Earlier participants in the debate have taken full advantage of that to discuss the totality of social security spending. In the past, Opposition parties have been rather creative in selecting statutory instruments to tag on to the uprating order, so that the debate could be broadened.

The uprating of benefits is an important occasion in the parliamentary calendar for consideration of social security in the round, but it would be helpful if we could spend an afternoon or a day examining the implications for all benefits, contributory and non-contributory. That is what I tried to suggest earlier in my intervention to the Secretary of State's speech. We need to understand what direction the entire system is taking. Perhaps we can pursue that through the usual channels, possibly as part of the modernisation process.

I am worried about the future of the contributory principle. The Minister was kind enough to drop me a note last week adverting to the written answer dealing with the industrial injuries scheme on 20 January at column *474*. The Secretary of State said that he was looking into alternative replacements for no-fault compensation arrangements that would meet the objectives of the current scheme.

That is an example of an individual initiative that is fine as far as it goes, but if industrial injuries compensation arrangements suddenly become an on-cost for employers as an attempt to modernise an intrinsic part of the contributory benefit system, that will be another example of the salami-slice approach to the basis of the contributory principle. We must be careful about that.

Looking at the detail of all the orders, I am worried that much of the motivating force for reform is coming from the Treasury, not the Department. My fear—I say this to the Minister neutrally—is that while the Department is doing its best to make the current system work, to get things right first time, to deal with fraud and to do an honest job, all the change, the reforms, the so-called modernisation is being driven from the Treasury. I do not believe that the Treasury has a genuine understanding of the contributory principle, or any history or tradition of supporting it.

I agree that interdepartmental working is necessary to achieve sensible changes in benefit, but I am getting increasingly nervous about the signs that the Treasury is entirely in the driving seat. I know that the Minister, as a new Minister, will be interested in making his mark. If I may give him a little avuncular advice, all he needs to do is to sort out the Treasury, and his ministerial career will never look back.

Mr. Fraser: That was a leader's speech.

Mr. Kirkwood: It was not a leader's speech—I care more for my sanity.

I shall refer briefly to the report of the Acheson committee, which dealt at length with the health equalities in our nation. We should pay careful attention to one of the sentences in the report, in which Acheson stated that

"empirical evidence comes from research demonstrating that people whose incomes consist entirely of state benefits"—

which we are uprating this afternoon—

"have insufficient money to buy items and services necessary for good health."

We cannot ignore that, when we set income support levels. If that is true of health, it must be true of housing, too.

The Secretary of State's speech was devoted—understandably, as this is the Government's main strategy—to efforts to get people off benefits and into work. Housing benefit is by far the biggest hurdle to that, and we must bear that in mind.

To return to Donald Acheson's point, I believe that we often do not look carefully enough at the adequacy of benefit levels. I recommend to the Minister as bedtime reading a book by John Veit-Wilson which was published about six months ago, entitled "Setting Adequacy Standards: How Governments Define Minimum Incomes." It makes interesting reading because it examines what other Governments do. It is honest about setting adequacy standards that are scientific and based on research, as opposed to those that are politically affordable.

I recognise that what social scientists determine as the minimum income for a two-child family may not be affordable. Even if it were affordable, important work-incentive problems would be involved. If poor families are paid more benefit, the incentive to work is reduced. The issue is not straightforward. Veit-Wilson and others demonstrate the need for a definable standard that would create a base-line around which the debate could take place. We do not have such a base-line at present.

The welfare reform Bill that we confidently expect in the next few weeks would provide an opportunity for that. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) will tie a wet towel round his head and lead the charge. Whoever serves on the Standing Committee can look forward to many happy hours of close scrutiny and cross-examination from him. I shall be sitting in the Public Gallery, occasionally cheering him to the echo.

The welfare reform Bill will offer an excellent opportunity to start thinking—if the Government have not done so already—about setting and defining a standard. The Green Paper published by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) while he was still a Minister set out performance indicators. The Government were brave to do that. I thought that some were rather intangible, to be honest, but performance indicators are valuable because they allow people to test Government's performance. I hope that the idea has not been lost.

I was lucky to join the hon. Member for Gravesham (Mr. Pond) at the relaunch of the new Policy Studies Institute report on public policy indicators. If the Minister is stuck for bedtime reading, he may add that to his list. It further developed the idea set out in the Green Paper. Such performance indicators are extremely valuable and should be considered by the Government.

Related work has already been done by the family budget unit on low-cost but acceptable standards of budget. I understand, as I said earlier, that some of those levels may be unattainable politically, immediately. However, the Family Budget Unit discovered that at January 1998 prices, a low-cost but acceptable level of income support—assuming 100 per cent. housing benefit and 100 per cent. council tax benefit—would be £160.82 a week, not £121.75 a week. That represents a shortfall of £39.07 a week for a couple aged over 18 with two children and who are not in work. We could argue about what is in and what is not in, and what should be in and what should not be in, but that is a severe shortfall in such a family's budget.

A family in such circumstances might be able to live with that level of shortfall for a brief period—we are all trying to achieve a situation in which people are on benefit for only a transitional period and then get back into work—but such a level is unsustainable for people on long-term benefit. It is therefore not surprising that Donald Acheson's report found that, in the long term, people's health suffers because of the inadequacy of benefit levels.

The Government are fond of saying two things in their defence when they are charged with shortfalls and inadequacies of that kind. They say, "Don't worry, there is a minimum wage coming and £3.60 an hour will make a big difference." Well, the family budget unit's report, "Low Cost but Acceptable", deals very effectively with that line of defence. It says clearly:

"A minimum wage of £3.60 will not prevent family poverty"

and says why it thinks that is so.

The Family Budget Unit also says that average female manual earnings and family credit levels for two-parent families are below "Low Cost but Acceptable" level and, perhaps more worryingly, it finds that it is unlikely—those are January 1998 figures—that the working families tax credit will remedy the situation. Even those figures do not reach "Low Cost but Acceptable" levels of income. A lot of work has to be done to ensure that we know what the people on the level of benefit that we are agreeing to this afternoon have to face in terms of long-term periods on low income.

I have two other things to say about that, staying with the theme of inadequate levels of income. Although the social fund account is not directly covered in the orders, the Comptroller and Auditor General's report on the 1997-98 social fund account has been published this very day. Two things concern me. First, I have been worried for some time that—although I believe that the levels of income provided for in the uprating orders are inadequate, and we could argue by how much—increasing numbers of people on benefit are repaying social fund loans.

I am getting very nervous about the extent to which that is compounding the difficulties, the poverty and the effects on health. I am worried that about 330 million social fund repayments are being made annually. I understand the principle behind the social fund, and think that it is positive. If more interest-free loans were made available, especially for community care grants, public money would be saved in the long run, but the amount of money for such grants has been static at £96 million for the past two or three years. We should consider that, because it impacts on the totality of people's incomes.

Those on low budgets would be helped to make ends meet if the Government looked carefully at the budget for community care grants and the impact of the discretionary element of social fund repayments that are currently being made.

The Minister knows that the Government Actuary—who always compiles a report on such orders—has recommended for the balance in the national insurance fund a

"minimum level of one-sixth (16.7 per cent.) of benefit payments".

I would be interested in the Government's response to the report's conclusions, because the balance in the fund—the money that we are not spending—is likely to be

"significantly higher than estimated in the report on the changes in April 1998 . . . because of a higher opening balance".

That is understandable, and it was inevitable. He adds that there have been

"significantly higher contribution receipts, lower benefit payments, lower payments to personal pensions and higher investment income than were estimated at this time last year."

That deserves some comment from hon. Members.

No Treasury grant is coming into the fund for 1999-2000, which is a questionable decision, considering the inadequacy of benefit levels. The Government Actuary concludes by discussing the

"balance in National Insurance Fund at the end of successive financial years",

which is expressed as a percentage of benefit payments in the previous financial year. In 1998 it was 22.5 per cent., against a minimum of 16.7 per cent.; in 1999 it is 27.6 per cent., which is a positive balance; and the projection for 2000 is 29.4 per cent. People are entitled to ask what is going on. The balance is going up fast—a lot faster than inflation and a lot faster than pensions. The limit is 16.7 per cent., but we are heading for 29.4 per cent. next year. No Treasury money is being put into the fund, so why cannot we make better use of some of the money in the fund to expand and develop contributory benefits?

There is overwhelming need—demonstrable need—to look at those inadequacies. It would be to the benefit of the whole House if the Minister dealt with that in his

[Mr. Kirkwood]

winding-up speech, so that we can keep the debate's context of the totality of the expenditure in some kind of understandable kilter.

4.6 pm

Mr. Paul Goggins (Wythenshawe and Sale, East): It is, as always, a pleasure to speak after the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood). I pay tribute to his work as Chairman of the Select Committee on Social Security, on which I had the pleasure to serve for almost a year.

The Committee debated and took evidence on the benefit integrity project when I was a member. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said this afternoon that the BIP is finally to come to an end. Many hon. Members, and certainly all members of the Select Committee on Social Security, will be delighted by that. I have received a written answer from my right hon. Friend this afternoon, giving details of what will come after the BIP. He said in his speech that he would be writing to all hon. Members, but his answer to me today reads:

"Initially, the new system will exclude DLA recipients whose cases were examined by the Benefit Integrity Project".

That is welcome. Those who have suffered should not have to go through that process again. The answer continues:

"People with a fixed period award due to end within the next three years will also be excluded"

from the new system.

Mr. Oaten: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it might make sense to exclude from the new system people who were excluded from the benefit integrity project—those groups that were exempt? The written answer has not made any mention of that.

Mr. Goggins: The written answer goes on to explain that all those things will be handled sensitively and in consultation with the groups with which the Government have regular discussions. All those points will be taken into consideration as the discussions proceed. Crucially, the written answer mentions training and evaluation after six months of operation, so it is clear that the Government take this whole issue extremely seriously.

The BIP, to refresh the memories of hon. Members, was founded on the spurious claim that there was £500 million of benefit fraud within the DLA system. The project was drawn up, without proper consultation, by the previous Government and implemented by officials three days before the general election. It was targeted only at those claimants on the highest rates of DLA, which meant that claimants—

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Goggins: I shall finish this point. Claimants could only lose, rather than gain, benefit.

Hon. Members: The hon. Gentleman has only just walked in.

Mr. Hayes: I would be the first to acknowledge that I have not been here for the whole of the debate, but a point that the hon. Gentleman made concerns me. I accept much of what he said, but the Government have been in power for a considerable time and many of these things have taken place during the past two years. Surely he would join me in attacking his Government—at least mildly—for not dealing with what he clearly described as an outrage much sooner.

Mr. Goggins: Several of my hon. Friends are suggesting that you have only just arrived—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. I have been in the Chamber for a considerable time, and I should be grateful if the hon. Gentleman would use correct parliamentary language.

Mr. Goggins: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In any event, I am glad to have the opportunity of making clear to the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) my belief that the Government have acted with integrity. They have exempted various categories that would otherwise have been caught by the benefit integrity project; moreover, crucially, they have created a partnership with disabled people's organisations, which Ministers have been developing over the past few months. Now they are winding up the benefit integrity project, and replacing it with a system that does not assume that every claimant of disability living allowance is a benefit fraudster, but ensures that the right amount of benefit goes to those who need it. That is a good example of the Government's attitude in taking seriously a hard-hitting Select Committee report based on evidence, and listening to disabled people and their organisations.

We have heard this afternoon, and in other announcements and statements, about action that the Government are taking to give further support to people with disabilities. The higher mobility rate of disability living allowance is to be extended to three and four-year-olds: £35 a week is to be provided for families who, surely, need that extra help. Pilot projects are already under way for the new deal for disabled people. That will bring into the workplace people who have been shut out and ignored for years—people who have been treated as though they were incapable of work, although many want and are able to work. The Government are also introducing the disabled persons tax credit and the disability income guarantee, which guarantees £128 a week for a single disabled person and £169 for a couple.

As we have heard again this afternoon, at the heart of Government policy is the aim of getting people off benefits and into work. The hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh)—who unfortunately is not in the Chamber now—was sceptical about that, but the fact is that 400,000 more people are in work now than at the time of the general election, and 53,000 people under 25 are in work who otherwise would not have been. Those are incredible statistics. Young people who were formerly dismissed and excluded are now working, mostly in unsubsidised jobs, as a result of the new deal. So far, the Government have halved the number of young people who are long-term unemployed. I do not think that these are grounds for scepticism; I think that they are great grounds for optimism.

The aim of returning people to work will be furthered by the extension of the new deal to lone parents, people with disabilities and older long-term unemployed people.

Family-friendly policies will encourage more people back into the workplace. Crucially, one of the orders that we are discussing reduces employers' national insurance contributions, which will encourage the creation of jobs.

As well as creating more jobs, however, we must ensure that work pays—that it is worth while. Notwithstanding the statistics cited by the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, the minimum wage will make a difference: it will make a difference to the take-home pay of 2 million workers, many of them women. There is also the guarantee of a minimum income of £10,000 a year for working families, and—this, too, is in one of the orders that we are discussing—the abolition of the employees' £69 fee for entry to the national insurance system.

Those who cannot work, because they are disabled or retired, have family responsibilities or cannot find work—some people, of course, fall into all those categories—must be supported. That is central to today's debate. I do not think anyone would pretend that income support amounts to a king's ransom, and I urge the Government to continue to do all that they can to raise incomes above the income support level. That should be our aim. Much has been said this afternoon about the role of means-testing, but the fact remains that, in the first year following the general election, 100,000 fewer people were claiming income support than at the time of the election.

Earlier, my independence of mind was called into question, but I was trying my best to square what the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) was saying about means-testing—his sudden rejection of it—with the fact that the last Government presided over a massive expansion of means-testing in the system.

Mr. Kirkwood: Speaking of independence of mind, may I bring up the question of the Conservatives' independence of mind? I know that we have new arrangements for Thursdays, but I find that I have been given a parcel of oral Treasury questions by Conservative central office. Is our independence of mind now being challenged on Thursday mornings? Are we to be offered Treasury briefs to help us through Treasury questions?

Mr. Goggins: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will make good use of that additional briefing.

The last Government ignored a serious issue. They thought that, by cutting insurance-related benefits, they could drive down the cost of social security; but by ignoring the fact that one in five families had no work and ignoring the pensions and savings needs of those on middle and low incomes, they created a move towards more and more means-testing. That is why the benefits bill has doubled over the past 20 years.

The trend in pensioner incomes has been similar to the trend in society as a whole. The hon. Member for Gainsborough said that all had gained from the increase in income over the past 20 years, but that simply is not true. In average terms, there has been a real increase in incomes, and those at the top—the better off—have experienced a massive increase. Those at the bottom, however, including pensioners, have fallen further and further behind. This is the position that the Government inherited: one in three pensioners is at or below the poverty line, and one in four people in Britain who are in poverty are retired people—pensioners.

Others have mentioned the report "Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion", which was published yesterday by the New Policy Institute. The report includes important findings about pensioners and their incomes. Pensioners with private incomes over and above the state retirement pension are likely to spend twice as much on food and half as much on fuel as those who rely on the state pension and means-tested benefits. The report also says that pensioners with private incomes over and above the state pension spend, on average, £146 a week, while those who rely on the state spend an average of £83 a week. That means that those at the bottom have a very different quality of life from those at the top.

The Government are trying to reduce the gap. They are trying to do two things in particular. First, they are trying to create a framework for the future, as can be seen from the Green Paper "Partnership in Pensions", which was published before Christmas. They want to ensure that everyone has not just the state retirement pension but a second pension, so that more and more people can cease to depend on means-tested benefits. They want to build on the success of occupational pensions, but also to introduce low-cost stakeholder pensions and a second state pension for the very low paid and for carers.

Mr. Hayes: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Goggins: I hope that, if I do, the hon. Gentleman will pay tribute to the Government's intention of introducing second state pensions for carers.

Mr. Hayes: I did not intend to mention that specifically, but I want to make a closely related point.

The hon. Gentleman seems to welcome the idea of looking at all of pensioners' income, rather than just income from the state. That is laudable, but is it not very similar to the Conservative party's proposal, made immediately before the election, which was so roundly condemned by people such as the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues? Is there not a degree of hypocrisy in what he is saying? I agree with much of it, but, frankly, I think it very similar to what Conservative Members have been saying for many years.

Mr. Goggins: My recollection is that it was in the air at the last general election that the whole state system would be privatised if the Conservative party regained power, whereas the Labour party and Government believe that the benefit of a second-tier pension, which better-off people have enjoyed for years in retirement, should be extended to those on middle and low incomes, so that all in society can have an income that is above the income support level. I hope that Conservative Members share that aim.

We must not only create that framework for the future, but act now. As one of the pensioners whom I meet in my local pension forum often remarks to me, "When people talk about pensions policy, they always talk about the long term. I am 84. I need action now." The Government have indeed been taking action.

We know that the value of the state retirement pension has fallen relative to earnings, but we also know that, if we were simply to increase the state retirement pension, those pensioners with the lowest incomes would gain the

[Mr. Goggins]

least because, pound for pound, they would lose their additional top-up. We therefore have to find different ways in which to help the poorest pensioners.

Value added tax on fuel has been reduced and, last winter, £50 extra was given for those on income support to help with their fuel bills. Free eye tests will be introduced from April and concessionary bus travel has been extended. All those things are important to sustain the quality of life for poorer pensioners. We also have the spending on the national health service and we are keeping inflation down. That is important for pensioners with limited savings.

The Secretary of State said that more could be done and that he hoped to do more. I hope that the Government are able to do more. They should receive support from Conservative Members for doing more for today's poorest pensioners.

At the heart of the policy is the decision to introduce for the poorest pensioners the minimum income guarantee, which has an above-inflation increase built into it—£5 for single pensioners, £7 for pensioner couples. If in future years the Government are in a position to deliver an increase above inflation again, they should be encouraged to do so, but more than just the value of the minimum income guarantee is important.

The rebranding of income support and, before that, supplementary pension—*[Laughter.]* The hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) laughs, but one of the consequences of its being called income support and supplementary pension is that it has put many thousands of pensioners off claiming their entitlement because they feel stigma and shame. We should change not just the name, but the level and the value, and work to ensure that all those pensioners who are entitled to receive it do receive it. Again, the Government must be commended for their work to ensure that more and more pensioners who are entitled to the benefit are able to receive it.

Mr. Rendel: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, if we were to give a lump sum in the pension itself to older pensioners, that would be a better and more effective way to ensure that the money got into the pockets of pensioners than insisting on their demanding something through income support?

Mr. Goggins: There are additions for older pensioners, but—I come back to the point that I made earlier—if we increase the state retirement pension, the one group of people who will not gain are those who depend on income support, because they will lose, pound for pound, their top-up benefit. The people who will benefit are those who already have substantial additional private income. So the Government are entirely right to target the effective support in the way that they are doing.

Savings was an issue introduced into the debate by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), and various other hon. Members have commented. We all know that too many pensioners—many of them come to us in our surgeries and at other gatherings—feel that they are being penalised for having made modest savings; modest in this day and age. As soon as a pensioner has £3,000, he begins to lose support. When he has £8,000, he loses all support.

In their Green Paper, the Government have invited comment, debate and suggestions on how that position can be tackled. They have two choices if they are able to do something in that sector. They can disregard a portion of private income—income from an occupational pension or from savings—or change the savings limits: the £3,000 and £8,000. It would be interesting if the Minister were able to comment on that, but it seems to me that the most cost-effective way in which to tackle the problem and to better target benefit is to change the savings limits, so that people who do save and have something in the bank are not penalised.

While I am making that point, may I ask the Minister also to consider the issue of funeral bonds? I know that there is an issue about whether they can be counted as savings, and that some discretion is exercised within the system over whether to count them as savings or not, but some pensioners in poorer parts of my constituency have put £1,000 into a funeral bond to pay for a dignified funeral. To view that as in some way dodging the system is perhaps taking things too far. I hope again that the Government will be able to consider that matter.

Last week, I attended with a number of other hon. Members the launch of Church Action on Poverty's "Pilgrimage Against Poverty" campaign. At that gathering, my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) said that the

"whole purpose of being in politics is to help the poorest and weakest".

I know that all my hon. Friends and many Opposition Members share that goal and aspiration. Certainly the Prime Minister shares it. He said clearly that, if Labour failed to help those at the bottom of society during the five years of its first term, we would have failed.

I believe that we will assist substantially those who are at the lowest end of society. We must encourage people into work and ensure that work pays, but we must also change the social security system to assist people. We need to change the structure of the benefit system. The changes to bereavement benefits are a good example, reflecting changes in employment patterns for women, but also equalising the situation for widowers who have dependent children, who need help and who, at the moment, do not receive it.

More than anything else, we need to do what the Secretary of State was calling for at the beginning of the debate: change the culture of the social security system. We have seen the potential for changing that culture with the new deal and with what has happened in the Employment Service. Anyone who has visited the local job centre and spoken to new deal staff will know how their job has been transformed by the opportunity really to assist, to advise and to support people back into work.

That must happen throughout the social security system, particularly the Benefits Agency. I am sure that staff at the agency will welcome that opportunity. We must not just ask, "Do you qualify? Can you fill this form in?" but ensure that people get the right benefits and the right amount of benefit. We must ask, "How can the system support you?" so that we have a proactive system, rather than a passive system.

I know that lack of money is central to poverty and that, where people do not have money, clearly, they are poor, but I also believe that a system with real concern for the poor does not just lob £1 or £2 extra a week on to

a person's benefit. It takes people far more seriously than that. If I consider the whole range of public services in health and education, the way in which we are trying to make the streets safer places, and the way in which the Government are encouraging people in poorer communities to get involved and to participate, I see that we have the opportunity to create the crusade against poverty to which all hon. Members should sign up and in which we can all engage.

4.29 pm

Mr. Christopher Fraser (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate because it is fundamentally important to all constituents throughout the country, although I will use some instances in my constituency to demonstrate some of my points regarding the Government's position.

The serious aspect of what we are discussing is the Government's record in power and their failure to live up to their pledges to the electorate, on the basis of which they were given the position of Government in the May election the year before last. High on that list is their failure to reduce welfare spending and to come up with a radical programme—as has been mentioned by my hon. Friends already—which satisfies the test that the Prime Minister announced in his first speech after the election. "Does the system trap people on benefits?" was one of the big issues that was taken up at that time.

The Government's Green Paper on pensions was widely regarded as a missed opportunity, not just by the Conservatives but by those outside the House. The Government's proposals are not so much a radical reform as tinkering at the edges. It is important to repeat that, because they do not deal with the main issues. They propose a modification of the existing system rather than the new approach that we realise is a fundamental requirement.

The aim is simple—to provide security in retirement for those who cannot save enough and to persuade those who can save to do so. The problem is also simple—ever fewer workers will have to support ever more pensioners as people live ever longer. The level of state pension that the country can afford will increasingly become worthless. It has been predicted that, in 50 years, 8 million pensioners could be making ends meet with only the help of income support.

The cause is also well understood. There are many people who cannot or will not save for their old age. The Government have, as usual, promised much—a long-term and radical approach, difficult decisions and a reduction in dependency. In short, they have promised an integral part of a new welfare state for the new millennium. A great deal was expected of their long-overdue pensions Green Paper, which was finally published in December last year.

We should have known better. There is evidence aplenty on the Government's broken promises and their propensity for saying one thing and ending up doing another. In opposition, the Labour party said that TESSAs and PEPs were safe. In power, they have praised those who make provision for their old age. However, they are now abolishing those two popular tax-exempt savings schemes. If they truly admire those who provide for themselves in their old age, why withdraw dividend tax credits for individual non-taxpayers, the majority of whom are retired people on low incomes who depend on their modest share portfolios to cover household bills? My constituent Mr. Hindle summed up his concern thus:

"The Labour party promised not to increase taxes. Isn't this a tax increase when those with tax allowances are not allowed to use them?"

He went on:

"As a thrifty pensioner, and my wife a housewife and carer, how do we ever hope to recover from the loss of an invaluable part of our income."

We have talked about some of Labour's manifesto pledges. Another one was to keep the state earnings-related pension scheme for those who wish to remain in it. That has also been broken. The Government plan to abolish it and replace it with something slightly different. However, the son of SERPS is a stop-gap measure, because the Secretary of State hopes that it will become superfluous as the Government's stakeholder pensions are taken up.

Why do the Government have a consistent compulsion to fix things that are not broken and to wipe the slate clean and start again in the name of modernisation? It is all the more disgraceful because they are changing the rules on pensions after responsible people have committed their money and decided on a long-term strategy for their retirement.

What of measures to resolve the problems that I referred to earlier? What of measures to address the problem that too few people save enough to look after themselves in retirement? What of those who have to eke out a miserable existence on means-tested benefits courtesy of the taxpayer? To help the poorest pensioners, the Government have proposed a new guaranteed minimum income at an estimated cost to the taxpayer of £2 billion. Pensioners will have to be assessed to determine whether they are entitled to that so-called income. That is an extension of means-testing and perhaps a forerunner of a means-tested basic state pension, as my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) said earlier.

The real difficulty that I have with the proposal is the potentially damaging implication of guaranteeing someone a pension income regardless of their behaviour during their adult life. When that is coupled with the Government's decision to duck the principle of compulsory second pensions, it means that anyone reluctant to save could come to the conclusion that, if the state promises reasonable provision, there is no need to set aside money for their old age.

For those on low incomes, an affordable level of saving will never produce a meaningful second pension. For those who are prudent and put away a little each week, their tiny pension will surely rule out entitlement to not only the guaranteed minimum income, but income-related benefits. Who in their right mind will sign up?

To compound the problem further, the Government have pledged to uprate the minimum income guarantee in line with earnings. The value of the benefit to someone who has never saved will increase more quickly than the basic state pension and other state benefits and, probably, the return on investments. The threshold above which someone could gain by setting up a second pension will get higher with every passing year.

In effect, the minimum income guarantee will extend means-testing and undermine the contributory principle. How can the Government reconcile that with the

[Mr. Christopher Fraser]

Prime Minister's pledge to move away from the benefit culture towards independence of the individual? It does not square, and people are sceptical. How does the Government's approach persuade people on less-than-average earnings to forgo jam today in the hope that they can afford bread in retirement, particularly when they see others on similar earnings enjoying not only jam today but perhaps a holiday or other treats in the secure knowledge that the state will provide the bread when the time comes?

To encourage working people to make provision for their retirement, the Government have proposed stakeholder pensions. Is there any reason to believe that they will be more easily understood by people unfamiliar with savings and investment schemes? Are they likely to be safer or more flexible or represent better value for money than other pension schemes currently being marketed? If so, perhaps they might be more attractive to new savers, but the prospect of paying lower national insurance contributions is hardly an offer than cannot be refused, particularly to a youngster who has recently started work, to whom retirement seems a lifetime away, or to a young couple with a family whose daily needs leave little spare cash at the end of the week. The success of stakeholder pensions is dependent on a big if. At worst, they could threaten or destroy existing private and occupational pension arrangements.

We face a muddle over the Government's new individual savings accounts, which are just weeks away from their launch. I am highly dubious that many of the criticisms that have been levelled against the stakeholder pensions can be resolved and that the Government will fully address many of the issues that have been raised today.

I should like to turn again to the problems of today's pensioners—those who have made provision for their old age and face the reality that it will be worth less from now on. I have already spoken about the dividend tax credits. There is also the pensions tax, which abolished tax credits for pension funds and other non-taxpaying institutions. Most pensioners are thrifty. They come to surgeries in my constituency and talk about the sacrifices that they have made. They believe that they have been punished by the Chancellor, but it is too late for them to do anything to reverse the ever-increasing erosion of the monthly pension. All that they can do is tighten their belts. They fear the consequences, not least to their health. We have heard the feelings of one of the Liberal Democrat Members about that.

Mr. Hayes: I have no wish to interrupt my hon. Friend's eloquent argument, except to add to the list of burdens that the Government have imposed on pensioners the withdrawal of tax relief on private medical insurance. Many pensioners have written to hon. Members complaining about that move. It disproportionately hurts pensioners and places an extra burden on the national health service. It really is nonsense and adds to his admirable list of concerns expressed on behalf of pensioners in Dorset, for whom he works very hard.

Mr. Fraser: It was kind of my hon. Friend to make that last comment. Many pensioners who are tightening their belts had sought to minimise the impact of any future health problems by taking advantage of the tax relief on private medical insurance. Now they are at the mercy of the national health service. I shall not discuss the Government's approach to the national health service, but I am sure that the House appreciates the mess that they have made of it and the burden that they are placing on pensioners who had helped themselves or planned to do so and can no longer afford private medical insurance.

Another constituent, Mr. Bampton, wrote in response to the Government's Green Paper on pensions:

"The Government is talking about things they may do in five years' time. We pensioners need help now. An interim measure. Not more consultation. If you have a fire in the kitchen, you do not call the insurance company first. You call the fire brigade."

The hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins) said that instant work is being done to alleviate the problems affecting pensioners. I am afraid that he is much misguided. I frequently receive letters from pensioners who say that they need help now and not in five years time when they may not be here.

Labour's policies have already damaged Britain's savings culture. The savings ratio has fallen significantly under Labour. Ministers, particularly those who are gossiping on the Front Bench now, live in a fantasy world if they believe that their pensions policy will reverse the trend.

4.42 pm

Mr. Chris Pond (Gravesham): Along with other hon. Members, I was slightly astonished to hear the hon. Member for Mid–Dorset and North Poole (Mr. Fraser) suggest that many pensioners relied on means-tested benefit because they could not or would not save. Many of our constituents would find that rather insulting. Many pensioners who have worked hard all their lives now have an inadequate level of income, not because they have not saved or worked, but because of the actions of the previous Government, who took some £10 billion a year out of the state pensions scheme and made cuts in the basic pension and SERPS, leaving many pensioners reliant on means-tested benefit. The hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) was candid about the mistakes of the previous Government.

The hon. Member for Mid–Dorset and North Poole also asked why the Government wanted to fix something that was not broke. I think that was the phrase he used. Clearly the system is broke. *Social Trends*, which was published this morning, shows just how broke.

Mr. Fraser: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Pond: I shall not give way, as I know that the hon. Gentleman will say that he said "broken" and not broke. The colloquial phrase is "If it ain't broke, don't fix it".

Mr. Fraser: If the hon. Gentleman reads *Hansard* tomorrow, he will realise that when I spoke about people who could not or would not save, I was not referring to pensioners. I simply wanted to put the record straight.

Mr. Pond: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but it does not alter my point.

Social Trends reports that

"the gap between those with high incomes and those with low incomes grew, particularly during the 1980s."

During that decade, the incomes of the poorest increased by only one eighth as much as the highest incomes.

Several hon. Members have referred to the report by the New Policy Institute, which was launched last night and is funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, entitled "Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion". It documents the extent of what it calls "Labour's inheritance". It shows that, over the period 1979 to 1996–97, average disposable income rose by almost a third in real terms. The hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) suggested that the increase in wealth in the nation during those years had been shared by all groups, but the report shows that that was not the case. The poorest tenth saw their disposable income rise by less than half the average increase and at the end of 18 years, they had only £2 a day more to spend.

Labour inherited a situation in which a quarter of the population, including 4 million children, were stranded on a low income. A further study by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation reported that almost one in 20 children go without fresh fruit every day, do not have new and properly fitting shoes or live in damp housing conditions. That is the extent of the challenge faced by the Government. The proposals, including those which we are discussing today, are an extremely effective response to that challenge—to build a fairer and more prosperous society and ensure that all groups share in that growing prosperity.

The changes represent an important part of an overall strategy, the starting point of which is that, while spending on social security increased sharply under the previous Government, it was a reflection not of social generosity but economic failure.

Increasing numbers find themselves without work or opportunities and have to claim means-tested benefits to top up declining wages or national insurance benefits. I fully support the welfare-to-work strategy. The new deal will provide opportunities for young people, people with disabilities, lone parents and older unemployed people.

In my constituency, I recently met a young man who had been given a chance under the new deal to help to build the new district hospital that will serve my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate). The young man had been unemployed for some time. He was somewhat demoralised and was rather surly at the interview, but the Employment Service and the employer gave him a chance. Within weeks, he had been promoted to a supervisory position and was a highly valued member of the work force.

The single gateway is an important next step. At present, claimants are faced with an array of different institutions including the Employment Service, the Benefits Agency, local councils and the Child Support Agency. Providing a single access point to benefits will reduce the confusion that can lead to people losing out on help to which they are entitled and will allow us to provide every claimant with advice, not only on benefit entitlement but on the opportunities that may be available for jobs, training or child care. In most circumstances, people will be required to attend for interview. In my view, that is a fair requirement that should not be treated as a form of compulsion.

It has always been a condition of receipt of benefit that one completes an application and the condition that one should also attend an interview to seek advice is a reasonable and sensible extension of that principle.

Another element of the strategy is to ensure that, when people make the transition from welfare to work, they and their families enjoy an improvement in living standards. On Tuesday, we debated the working families tax credit, which will ensure that no working family with children will have an income of less than £190 a week. That is a major step forward in tackling the problem of the working poor, who represent the largest single group among the poor.

Even more importantly, the national minimum wage will come into effect in April and the Employment Relations Bill, published today, will provide a further element of the strategy to ensure that employment is properly rewarded. I promise that I will not stray beyond the subject of our debate by pointing out that the Bill contains an important new right to parental leave.

I hope that Ministers will consider ways of allowing parents on low incomes to take advantage of that new right, by making at least part of the leave period subject to payment. I believe that, in any case, it is necessary to consider the consequential changes in income support, family credit and the new working families tax credit that may be necessary to accommodate the introduction of parental leave.

The strategy also includes changes to national insurance contributions which are directly relevant to our debate and to which several hon. Members have referred. The changes coming into effect in April are welcome. The threshold for employers' contributions will be aligned with the basic tax threshold and employees' contributions are to be made fairer, with the abolition of the 2 per cent. payable on earnings below the lower earnings limit.

All those changes will make the system fairer but, as some hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), have suggested, we need to have a debate about the future of the national insurance contributory principle. It is clear that the principle commands widespread public support, which I endorse, but the system has been badly distorted in recent years.

The previous Government increased national insurance contributions dramatically, as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) said, increasing the standard rate of employee contributions by 50 per cent. By the mid-1990s, national insurance contributions accounted for almost 70 per cent. as much in total revenue as income tax. They had become a hidden but highly regressive form of income tax.

The changes that are to come into effect in April will certainly help, but I hope that we may go further, perhaps aligning the lower limit for employees' contributions with the basic tax threshold. As the Low Pay Unit has said, it will remain the fact that almost 2.5 million workers earn less than the lower earnings limit and are therefore unable to build up an entitlement to benefits.

More than 1 million people have more than one job and, even if their total earnings are high enough to bring them above the lower earnings limit, the earnings in either job may not, so the current system may not fit with the flexible labour market. Many employees' earnings fluctuate from week to week, sometimes above the limit

[Mr. Popd]

and sometimes not; they may pay substantial national insurance contributions but never build up an entitlement. Many women are in that position.

The proposals for increased crediting, to come into effect in April, will help, but I am glad that the Social Security Committee will have an opportunity to consider how the contributory principle might be adapted and whether it fits today's circumstances. My view is that the wide public support for the system is probably justified, but we should review the system's merits and shortcomings.

Some of the elements in the strategy to tackle poverty are important in the short term; not in the long-term future that many people will not see, but here and now. One such element is the biggest increase in child benefit in history. We must underline the fact that, because of the other changes, the poorest families will benefit from that increase.

I welcome my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's suggestion that we need to have a proper debate in the long term about whether future increases in child benefit should be subject to tax at the higher rates. The Select Committee has been considering that, and we need a genuine, adult debate on the issue, to consider whether an already well-targeted benefit could be targeted even more effectively in the longer term, allowing us to make still further increases in the basic rate.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State referred, at the other end of the age spectrum, to the Government's plans to provide security in old age. I believe that the proposals in the Green Paper represent a means of providing that security in the long term, especially for the lowest-paid, and I welcome them. The minimum income guarantee offers the more immediate help that the hon. Member for Mid–Dorset and North Poole seemed to think was unavailable. It will help many people on the lowest incomes.

Many pensioners express a sense of unfairness and feel that they are penalised if they have some small savings or a small occupational pension. All hon. Members will recognise that. I am pleased that the Green Paper says, and that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State confirmed today, that the Government are considering how to alleviate that effect.

Overall, we have a strategy—part of which has been discussed this afternoon—that will tackle the inequalities that have scarred our society, will be of immediate help to the very poorest and will provide important long-term help.

4.55 pm

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): It is clear that the Opposition share the Government's objective of seeking to find the right measures to look after and improve the lot of those who cannot look after themselves, and Labour Members' criticisms regarding the previous Government's policies will turn out to be misplaced.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) that the previous Government did not achieve the results for which they hoped, since social security expenditure doubled in real terms. Since 1992—after black Wednesday, the withdrawal from the ERM and the return to a sensible exchange rate—the economy has been in a recovery cycle. Yet although the growth in social security expenditure has slowed a little, it has continued, in the main, to be faster than the growth in national income.

I would argue that the previous Government's quite generous measures during a period of substantially rising employment showed their own errors. To a large extent, they were creating many of the problems that they were setting out to solve.

In reality—behind the rhetoric and the phrases that are aimed at winning votes—what the Government are doing is a continuation of that: they are tweaking, being a little more generous here and producing a bit more means testing. To argue that working families tax credit is not merely a recasting of family credit—paid by the employer, instead of through the Benefits Agency—is semantics.

Our main criticism of welfare to work has been its inefficiency and the cost of creating jobs. However, the previous Government put in place similar measures, and we understand the principle that such a communications mechanism is necessary. I do not believe that what the Government are doing is a radical departure. It is not the radical rethink that many were expecting, and it is certainly not the radical rethink that its pioneer intended.

We are seven years into an economic expansion, and the Government are boasting that social security expenditure is not growing as fast as it has been. However, what they are putting in place will result in a pattern similar to that of the past 10 or 12 years, only even worse. Expenditure will rise and, as growth slows, it will rise even more—and the costs will become locked in.

The principle that the Government are expounding is that subsidising people into work will result in permanently lower unemployment and, therefore, permanently lower social expenditure. That is not the case—it did not happen between 1992 and 1997. The Government can become locked in to the costs. In terms of working families tax credit, there is no reason why people who can draw generous benefits while working for 16 hours a week will work any more hours if they do not want to. The benefits exist, and will go on being drawn.

The point about means testing, to be blunt, is that someone has to pay for benefits. Over the past 25 years, direct and indirect taxation on ordinary, middle-income families—the great majority of people who pay taxes—has risen substantially. The proposed increase in benefits will make hardly any difference to the standard of living of people whose incomes are broadly average.

That would be desirable as long as those same people were not the ones who had to pay. It is inherently unfair that people who are in full-time work and bringing up children and who are not entitled to the various means-tested benefits should have to finance other people enjoying the same standard of living. The reaction is quite natural: they do not save more and they do not take part in society's great dynamic of hard work and self-improvement.

A welfare system that levels everyone up to the average may sound very Christian and nice, but the reaction of the people in the middle of the average—the ones who pay for the system—must be remembered. I do not believe that those people will be willing to keep on paying in the long term.

The second problem is the familiar one that we live an age in which it has become more common for families to break up and for couples to divorce. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green stressed, the measures introduced by the previous Government and by this Government are increasingly unfriendly to the family. Many professional commentators have observed that, over the past 15 years, it has been the efforts to solve the problem that have to a large extent created it. It is a classic case: make it easier for families to break up, and more will do so; take away the tax and other incentives for families to hold together and, when pressure is exerted, they will break up.

I am not opposed in principle to the concept of wanting to help women who are abandoned by their husbands and who have children to look after. I very much want to help them: the tragedy of their circumstances is only too evident in the work of the Child Support Agency. However, the problem must also be examined from another angle. If we want society to be satisfactory, with fewer problems, the best prescription remains the age-old one: families should have two parents who are married. All the statistics show that the children of such families are less likely to get into trouble and more likely to have successful careers, and so on. The opposite is equally true.

Moreover, the benefits of such a family group are felt by the parents as well as by the children. They depend on each other, especially when they get old: if one partner cannot work, the other provides care. I do not believe that most adults want to be alone, without a stable partner, as they go through life.

There is an argument in favour of tilting the tax and the welfare systems in favour of supporting the traditional family unit. If, with the best intentions in the world, a variety of measures are adopted that are tilted in the other direction, it is not surprising, in a very liberal society, that the family unit starts to break down.

Ms Stuart: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that families come under the most severe strain when parents try to combine work with family life? Far from breaking up families, Government help with child care offers them significant support.

Mr. Flight: I agree with the hon. Lady that there is added strain if both parents are working. However, although it may be that both parents work because they want to work, the major reason for both parents working is economic. The bill for the rising cost of welfare has been predominantly paid by people in the middle, and their economic response has often been that both parents have worked. Given the point made by the hon. Lady, I must ask her why the Government are making the position worse by virtually driving mothers out to work, even if they do not want to work, by saying that they will get family help and child care assistance only if they work, and that there will be none if they stay at home to look after their children. I cannot see your logic if you believe that.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Could the hon. Gentleman use the correct parliamentary terms?

Mr. Flight: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

It is interesting to focus on how the Government have thought about the Green Paper on pensions. It strikes me that a well-intentioned, academic approach based on numbers analysis has been taken. The areas that need to be targeted are identified through proportions and statistics, and the Government seek then to fine-tune measures that will target those problems. That seems a logical way in which to address problems, but it fails to take account of the knock-on effect of those measures, and of human nature.

It is ironic that one of the great obsessions of the Chancellor, the main architect of social security policy, is the elimination of tax avoidance and tax evasion. One would have thought that he would realise that human nature is such that no individual much wishes to pay more tax than he is legally obliged to pay. The point is to make it absolutely clear where the law falls. The sin is with those who stray into evading taxes.

At the other end of the spectrum, the more benefits there are, and the more they are structured with means testing and with bells and whistles, the more inevitable it becomes that people will structure their circumstances to obtain the maximum benefit. Equally, it is more likely that they will slip over the edge from actions that are straightforward and honest to actions that may be fraudulent. The classic example—where there has been an explosion of such cases—concerns cohabitation.

The incentives to be deceitful, including working families tax credit and other recent measures, are becoming ever larger. There is potential for straying across the line of honesty, and that encourages families to break down. I made the point during our recent debate on working families tax credit, but it must be wrong to make it not worth while to have a male partner unless he is earning more than the median wage after he has provided for himself. A tax and welfare structure that leads to that result simply must be wrong when it comes to benefiting children by giving them a two-parent family background in which to grow up.

Many hon. Members have mentioned the abandonment of the insurance principle. That amounts almost to standing Beveridge on its head. I assume that the logic is that we live in an age in which average incomes are much higher and there is no longer a need for universal benefits. If that were so, the welfare state should be increasingly targeted towards those who need some help. There are two objections. First, we must at least be honest. Many of my constituents aged over 50 would say that they have been cheated—that they paid national insurance all their lives but are being told that it was not an insurance scheme and that there are no benefits against it. If any private sector insurance company changed what it was delivering against its insurance contracts, it would be in considerable trouble.

Mr. Pond: What do the hon. Gentleman's constituents feel about a Government who increased national insurance contributions and then cut significantly the benefits for which they paid, including pensions and unemployment benefit, which was scrapped and replaced by the much less generous jobseeker's allowance? Would his constituents applaud a Government for doing that? What does he say about the Government whom he supported?

Mr. Flight: The hon. Gentleman makes my point. No Government should fiddle with an insurance system.

[Mr. Flight]

He implicitly criticised the previous Government for that; we implicitly criticise this one for it as well. It is a bad principle. Both Governments fudged the issue, which needs to be brought out into the open to be addressed. If we move towards a system of purely means-tested benefits and roll national insurance into income tax, as some hon. Members suggested, people's willingness to accept, and participate in, that will grow very sour. I repeat my main point: the crucial negative is that the great burden falls on the rump in the middle.

The pensions Green Paper proposals seek to target defined areas of need, but no one has sat back and considered what the by-products might be. There is a risk that the proposals will lead to a deterioration in private sector pension provision for people in the middle, whether it is companies giving up occupational schemes for stakeholder schemes or the phasing out of group personal pension schemes. I forecast that the net result will be a reduction in overall pension accumulation in the private sector and a reduction in the pension that the ordinary, average person will get. The people at whom the proposals are targeted will benefit, but I believe that insufficient thought has been given in designing the changes to the likely by-products.

The other key problem is self-employment. The design has not been targeted adequately at the problems of the self-employed. Who are the self-employed? What incentives do they need to make their own pension provision? We can debate that more next week.

There is an element of Nelson's telescope in this. The Government look through it with one eye to arrive at their conclusion. That may be the blind eye; they have not looked through the other eye—or perhaps through the other end of the telescope—to see what the knock-on effects of their measures will be. In particular, they have not considered the effects on human behaviour. That was the great mistake that we made over the past 10 years. We introduced social security reforms following the same trend. I assure the House that they were well intended, but they created too much of a dependency culture and ballooned the bill without achieving their objective. I am not at all convinced that any major change in policy has taken place that will allow us to break out of the problems. I fear that many of the results will be contrary to the objectives, and that the ballooning in the expense will be much the same as when we were in office.

With the best of faith, the Government should forget the rhetoric, step back and think about people's reaction to many of their measures. It would be dangerous for Government rhetoric to be smug about the measures that they have introduced. They should think about the negative knock-on effects. My biggest concern is that the lower half of the middle part of society—the dynamic part that will pay for all this—will become even more demotivated to save and not to become part of the dependency culture.

5.16 pm

Mr. Donald Gorrie (Edinburgh, West): My hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) and my very avuncular and hon. Friend the Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), have dealt with the general principles and issues very well. I should like to follow the hon. Member for Gravesham (Mr. Pond), who said that a radical reform was needed in the welfare system. I urge the Government to consider three points.

First, the documents that we are asked to agree today are still based on the pernicious idea that people under the age of 25 can live more cheaply than people over 25. That is wrong. Beer, food and housing cost as much for under-25s as for over-25s. On Monday, the House spent a lot of time discussing the appropriate age for sexual activity. There are different ages at which one can drink, drive or get married, and students of whatever age are deemed to be involved financially with their parents. Thus the whole age thing is muddled, and it is not logical to say that 25-year-olds are different from people of any other age. It is a return to the Victorian idea of leaving money in trust to prevent members of one's family from marrying until they were 35, in the belief that only then would they have the sense to choose correctly. I appreciate that changes cannot be made over night, but I urge the Government to change that.

Secondly, as others have said, housing benefit is the single greatest obstacle to people taking up work. It must be dealt with more seriously than just introducing a bit of uprating here and there. If we are to enjoy so-called joined-up government in years to come, housing costs must be addressed collectively. Relatively speaking, rents are much higher than in the past and, therefore, benefits are much higher. We should see whether there are other ways to support either the revenue cost or the capital cost of housing.

Recent research has shown that, if the Treasury gave more support to the capital cost of social housing, it would save much more on benefits for people living in that housing than it spends on construction, and would save money overall. The whole issue of the volume of housing benefit and how it forms a huge obstacle to people taking up work must be addressed.

Thirdly, the Government should simplify the whole system. It is a long time since I did any mathematics, but one formula in schedule 8 is calculated as (A x B) x C divided by 52—I see no point in having the brackets. That merely illustrates the futility of the effort. If the entire House were to be given an exam on the benefits systems based on that sort of stuff, our performance would be so abysmal that the Secretary of State for Education and Employment would send in Mr. Woodhead and his bunch to sort us out as though we were a low-performing school.

The whole system is hopelessly overcomplicated. It was invented by very clever people, which is part of the trouble, although it is encouraging to see that even very clever people do not always notice a misprint, with the result that we have an extra document before us today. Even Homer nodded in his proofreading. The trouble with the benefits system is that it is invented by very clever people; it is enacted by somewhat less clever people such as ourselves; it is put into effect by well-meaning people in offices who are totally snowed under and who have great difficulty administering it; and it is all done for the benefit of people many of whom do not understand it at all.

Changes give rise to an immense amount of work for officials in housing benefit offices. I know that they can feed figures into computers, but the fact is that they have to alter every single person's allowance. Might I suggest

something simpler, by giving an example of a purely amateur nature, although it might cause ribaldry among the intelligentsia in the far corner?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): There is no one in any corner.

Mr. Gorrie: There is when viewed from here. Perhaps they are invisible.

When recalculating a person's benefit, one can either start at the beginning and change every step of the calculation, which is what we are doing today, and reach the answer about 15 calculations later; or one can accept all the existing calculations and simply take everyone's benefit as it stands and increase it by 2 per cent., 3 per cent., or whatever the figure is. The latter method would mean that one would not have to recalculate every single person's benefit; instead, one would simply uprate the benefit. Surely we can apply common sense in that way. Even if my proposal would not work, cleverer people could no doubt produce cleverer solutions.

The whole system is a disaster because it is far too complicated and an enormous amount of time and money is wasted administering it. I have only short experience as a Member of Parliament, but I served as a councillor for 26 years, during which time I tried to help people to understand the benefits system and attempted to get mistakes made by benefit office officials corrected. Anyone who has any experience of the system knows the trouble caused by its complexity.

My suggestion is that, instead of making the system intellectually satisfying, we should seriously try to simplify it and turn it into a system that will work simply on the ground. I urge the Government to show real courage, to attack all the silly rules about age, to tackle the problem of housing finance and to sort out the complexity of the whole benefits structure.

5.23 pm

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): Mr. Deputy Speaker, today's debate has been especially interesting, which is due in large part to your judicious decision to allow it to range fairly wide, over all the policy areas that lie behind the uprating orders that are the formal subject of the debate.

I believe that there is considerable merit in the suggestion made by the Chairman of the Social Security Select Committee, the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), that Department of Social Security matters might form the basis of an annual debate, thus allowing the DSS to follow the example of other Departments, most notably the Ministry of Defence, which has an annual debate on the defence estimates. That debate gives the House an opportunity to review all the policy issues that flow from those estimates. The hon. Gentleman made that suggestion to the business managers and I am happy to endorse it.

Another reason why our debate has been extremely interesting is that many of the hon. Members who have contributed to it are past or present members of the Social Security Select Committee, or have otherwise done their homework and put a great deal of thought into the subject. Very few hon. Members, if any, appeared to make a perfunctory political speech for the purpose of throwing slogans across the Chamber.

The hon. Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) suggested that disability living allowance should be extended to children under three. I hope that the Under-Secretary will respond to that and all the other serious suggestions and questions that have been voiced this afternoon and will not brush them aside. I look forward to hearing his response.

The hon. Lady suggested also that, in training Benefits Agency officials, it is important not only to make them vigorous in their work to identify potential fraud or abuse but to ensure that they are sympathetic. The great majority of benefit claimants are extremely honest and the last thing that they want to do is defraud the taxpayer. Some of them may have suffered a major problem such as unemployment or disability, and sympathy is certainly the first quality, although not the only one, that Benefits Agency staff should develop. The agency's culture should be based on that principle.

The hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel), in what has become the Liberal Democrats' traditional stance, whatever the subject under discussion, suggested further expenditure. He suggested doubling child benefit for children under five. He wants also to raise capital thresholds. That might go some way to dealing with the perversity and unfairness of means-testing, but it would, first, be expensive and, secondly, I hope that the Government are not under the illusion that raising capital thresholds would remove that perversity and unfairness. It would simply mean that the disincentive to work or save was extended so that it impacts at slightly higher levels of savings.

Mr. Rendel: The hon. Gentleman implied that increasing capital allowances in line with inflation would be expensive. I should have thought that in real terms it would make no difference.

Mr. Davies: In his speech, the hon. Gentleman did not—or at least I did not hear him—make the important provision "in line with inflation". Clearly, that would mean that the additional costs would not be great, but equally there would be no real increase in incentives to work and save because, by definition, the hon. Gentleman would not change the real value of the capital threshold, so his proposal would make no contribution to reducing the problems of means-testing.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart), who was a member of the Select Committee, and who always speaks with considerable knowledge on the subject, gave us an interesting comparison with the German system of social security. It is common ground in the House that we all recognise a debt to the German system. After all, Bismarck first invented a system of social insurance and—I hope that Liberal Democrat Members will appreciate this reference—a visit to Germany by Lloyd George and his adviser, the young William Beveridge, in the early years of this century lay at the root of the Asquith Government's proposals for social insurance, unemployment insurance and old-age pensions.

The German system was also the inspiration behind many of Beveridge's proposals in his White Papers published during the second world war. We have therefore been drawing lessons from Germany during the past 100 years, and many features of its system may be relevant to us now.

[Mr. Davies]

The Chairman of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, to whom I have already referred, also followed the Liberal tradition of throwing money at every problem. He suggested that we should increase income support markedly. I hope that I have at least the rough magnitude of the figures correct in my mind. He said that the appropriate level of support for a two-parent, two-children family should be in the order of £160, rather than £120, or so, a week—a considerable increase. He was good enough—of course, he is an expert in the matter, so the point would not have escaped him—to appreciate that that might have a rather devastating effect on work incentives for people whose prospects in the job market might lead to earnings not dissimilar from such an amount. Nevertheless, he made his points with his usual authority.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), who has apologised to me for his absence—his family commitment involving one of his children is the best possible excuse—dealt with the major quandary before the House: what the Prime Minister really meant when he said that he would bring down social security spending. My hon. Friend said that the Prime Minister obviously never meant for one moment what he said, because such a statement is manifestly stupid and unrealisable, and so, in fact, he was basically having the British public on. That seemed a very plausible analysis of this rather strange situation. I shall be returning to that matter because it is of essential importance to the way in which Parliament evaluates the new Government's policy in this area.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough said that it was impossible to abolish means-testing altogether, and very much endorsed the idea that the essential question, which was raised in an intervention by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), is whether one is in favour of increasing means-testing or reducing it. The question is in which direction one goes; it is not one of absolute means-testing or complete abolition. My hon. Friend endorsed the right hon. Gentleman's statement of that important issue, to which I shall also return.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough very importantly drew the attention of the House and the public to the threat that the Government are about to tax child benefit, and to all the damage that that would do. He cited an example of a family living in London on £31,000 a year, whose major breadwinner would pay income tax at a higher rate than someone with no children as a result of such a measure.

The hon. Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton) legitimately used her opportunity to take part in the debate to raise a constituency case—that of Mr. Smith—about which we all now know. After all, we are sent to this House by those who elect us, who expect us to stand up for them, especially when a crisis in their lives is exacerbated by their treatment at the hands of the Government. That is precisely Mr. Smith's circumstance. The hon. Lady set out very eloquently, for the benefit of the House, yet one more example—I have a little black book, incidentally, which is gradually filling up with many other examples—of injustice and perversity in the benefits and welfare system.

Ms Rosie Winterton: Does the hon. Gentleman appreciate that the injustice suffered by Mr. Smith has been experienced by others for some 50 years, yet his Government did nothing to sort it out? I said that we should take this opportunity to look forward to try to put right the injustice of many years. I did not see any evidence of his Government improving Mr. Smith's situation.

Mr. Davies: They were not my Government; they did not belong to me, they belonged to the Queen. If the hon. Lady means that I was a member of that Government, she is also mistaken. She is perfectly right that such anomalies, perversities and absurdities, which corrupt our benefits system—I use that strong word advisedly—have been present for a long time. The extraordinary thing about that intervention is the hon. Lady's attitude.

One might have supposed that, if the Labour party took its own rhetoric half seriously, Labour Members would be proud to come to the House, after Labour's great victory at the general election, and say, "Now we are going to put all these evils right." We have not heard that. We have not had a breath of such a suggestion in today's debate or in any other social security debate. All we hear is, "I am afraid that we have been unable to do any better than you lot did." If that is not a pretty pathetic abdication by the new Labour Government, I do not know what is.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Dorset and North Poole (Mr. Fraser) rightly put the spotlight on the Government's broken promises. He characterised such promises as the hallmark of the present Government, and he gave us several examples of matters—such as personal equity plans and the state earnings-related pension scheme, which I hope that we shall debate next week—on which the reality of the Government's action has been the exact reverse of Labour's absolutely unambiguous manifesto commitment. Ministers should be very ashamed of that record because, effectively, it amounts to the bamboozling of the British public, and I hope that they are not proud of that achievement.

I apologise to the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins) because I made my only absence from the Chamber during his speech, but I did hear him speak with genuine feeling for the disabled. His plea—which I hope will be heard—to the Government was that the replacement for the benefit integrity project, which is to run from April this year, should be humane in its treatment of the great majority of applicants, who will be genuine applicants: fellow citizens who find themselves in difficult circumstances which most of us do not suffer from, and who therefore deserve our respect and sympathy.

I understand that, when I was momentarily out of the Chamber, the hon. Gentleman said something extremely interesting, which has been reported to me and which, no doubt, will be in *Hansard*. He referred to the Government's minimum income guarantee for pensioners as a rebranding of income support. I was delighted to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles), who reported that comment to me, that the hon. Gentleman had used that phrase. I cannot accuse him of plagiarism, because the phrase that I have always used in this context is "a reclassification of income support", but "rebranding" is a much better word to sum up the essential dishonesty of the proposal, which, as presented by the clever PR gurus that the Labour party is so good at employing, apparently is unambiguously good

news for all state retirement pensioners. In practice, however, it does not mean a penny more for those who do not already qualify for income support.

Mr. Goggins: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davies: I give way to the hon. Gentleman; I hope that he has been quoted to me accurately.

Mr. Goggins: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way; it is a pity that he was not present when I spoke, but I ask him to accept that my arguments were as follows. First, I argued that the minimum income guarantee was, importantly, a real increase, in excess of inflation, for the poorest pensioners. Secondly, I said that the supplementary pension and income support have, unfortunately, been seen by many pensioners as a barrier to claiming, because they regard them as stigmatising—as handouts. The fact that we shall now have something called the minimum income guarantee will encourage them to make the claim, and break that barrier. It will mean that they can make the claim without feeling any stigma.

Mr. Davies: Obviously I did correctly quote the hon. Gentleman's words. The words that he has used in his intervention reinforce my argument. We are told that the fact that there is now something called the minimum income guarantee will change things. We are presented with the wonderful—characteristic—Labour party illusion that a change of name changes the substance. I have to tell the hon. Gentleman that one does not change the substance by changing the name, and that the minimum income guarantee is just another version of a means-tested benefit.

My hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) made the valid point that the Government's purported radicalism in social security is profoundly bogus. If one puts the best interpretation on the measures that they have introduced, working families tax credit is merely an extension of family credit. In our view, it is an ill-conceived and unnecessarily expensive extension of family credit. Nevertheless, it is conceptually an extension of family credit. Welfare-to-work is conceptually an extension of the jobseeker's allowance.

Credit for the concept of bringing together advice on finding work and the distribution of benefits is rightly due to the last Conservative Administration, although I never suggested then and I do not suggest now that everything that the last Conservative Administration did was for the best, in the best of all possible worlds.

My hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs made the point that badly needed to be made in the debate—that in speaking about uprating benefits, we must not forget that there is always another side to the balance sheet: the taxpayer must pay for whatever we decide to allocate as welfare benefits. Certain levels of such expenditure will not be socially acceptable.

To continue the logic of my hon. Friend's argument, I should point out that those of us who care about having an effective and humane welfare system must be careful that we do not cross the line beyond which the payment of welfare ceases to be socially acceptable and therefore politically feasible. In the United States recently that line was crossed, with unfortunate results for the recipients of benefits.

My hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs highlighted, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough, the essential anti-family bias of the Government's attitude towards welfare reform. There is no doubt that if a couple receive more benefit overall if they split up than if they stay together, that is an inducement which may, with successive changes in that direction, become a powerful and even an irresistible inducement for them to split up. That would create the tragic situation in which the welfare system could induce family breakdown.

Most of us would think that that was tragic, but I am not sure that all members of new Labour would consider it tragic. When my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) introduced the debate, he produced a devastating quotation from a leading Labour thinker, which suggested that she thought that it was a thoroughly good thing if the welfare system contributed to family breakdown. At least we know where we stand with such people.

The hon. Member for Gravesham (Mr. Pond), with his background in the Select Committee, knows a lot about the subject, although his speech sounded as though it had been drafted by Labour party headquarters. He said all the right things from the point of view of those on his Front Bench, and I hope that he is suitably rewarded. Of course, it is a classic tradition, not an invention of this Government, to use Back Benchers sometimes to prepare the ground for unpleasant initiatives that the Government plan to spring on the public.

I was therefore particularly concerned to hear the hon. Gentleman's remarks about preparing the ground for the taxation of child benefit. I fear that that rather sinister proposal is being contemplated by the Government.

Mr. Pond: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman is aware that, for some time, there has been a debate in this place about whether it would be sensible for future increases in child benefit to be subject to taxation at the higher rate. That is no revelation; my right hon. Friend the Chancellor said that in his last Budget statement.

Members of the Social Security Committee have been having a sensible and adult debate about those issues to see whether that is an option for the future and whether we will be able to provide greater increases in the basic rate of child benefit and target more effectively a benefit that is already well targeted. It is for the Government to decide, one way or the other. There has been no announcement on that.

Mr. Davies: The hon. Gentleman is good at calling for sensible and adult debate on important matters without explicitly telling the House his view. He hints, but, using a certain amount of common sense, we can glean his view on this matter. He never states it, but I conclude that he is in favour of the taxation of child benefit. I am extremely sorry about that.

The hon. Gentleman said exactly the same, and used an almost identical phrase, when he talked about the future of the contributory principle and national insurance. Again, he called for a debate. When evidently very loyal and well-directed Back Benchers make such statements at the end of debates, we should all be extremely anxious. What he says today about the taxation of child benefit—or, indeed, about further winding-down of the

[Mr. Davies]

contributory principle and undermining of the national insurance system—may tomorrow be a formal proposal from the Secretary of State.

A number of important points emerged from the debate, and the most important is that it is absolutely clear that the Government have abandoned their explicit commitment to bring down social security spending. We can argue about whether they ever meant it seriously, or whether they were simply laughing up their sleeve when they said that to British public. I agree with the interpretation of my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough.

Whether the Government originally meant what they said or not, and whether the Prime Minister thought that he was being honest or not when he made that commitment, it is clear that the Government have no intention of achieving it, and no prospect of doing so. What do new Labour Members do when they find that they either no longer can or no longer want to fulfil a manifesto commitment? Do they say to the House, "We are sorry, we got it wrong. We have thought again. We won the election on a false bill of goods and we are now telling you that we cannot deliver"? No, they do not.

New Labour Members come to the House and use every subtle subterfuge in the handbook of the PR gurus to try to divert attention from what is really happening. We had that again this afternoon. The Secretary of State—who is a brilliant man and a past master at this kind of thing—came to the Dispatch Box and talked about shifting welfare expenditure from income support and the jobseeker's allowance to the disabled, pensions and more long-term forms of benefit, as if that had been the commitment the Government had given. It was not; the commitment was to bring down social security spending.

What the Secretary of State suggested this afternoon may really have been in the Prime Minister's mind. But it could not have been new Labour's commitment for a basic reason: Labour Government's fiscal strategy depended on getting total social security spending down.

We were told at the election, "You can trust new Labour. We are no longer the spendthrift, mad-dog party that we were back in the 1970s. We will not ruin the country and have the International Monetary Fund in here. We will tell you how we will pay for all our extravagant electoral commitments. We will spend all this money on the national health service and on education, but do not worry. Do not lose any sleep over it. You can trust us. It will not mean crippling taxation, ruin for the country and the IMF coming to take us over again. We shall make savings elsewhere." Where were the savings to be made? In the social security budget.

If we take away those savings—the aggregate, global reductions in social security spending that Labour promised—the whole fiscal strategy collapses. There are two alternatives. One is that Labour cannot deliver on its health and education promises—and, as we know, it is not delivering on those promises: the NHS is breaking down, and class sizes are increasing. We know the story all too well. Alternatively, Labour will have to return to the agenda of crippling taxation and crippling deficits. This is a key part of the thoroughly bogus strategy with which Labour bamboozled the public and won the last election, and the central column of the edifice has been shattered this afternoon.

Another important issue has emerged today. The right hon. Member for Birkenhead probably understands social security better than any other Labour Member: he is an expert. He was alone among Front Benchers who joined the DSS after the election in having done his homework and considered the issues thoroughly when in opposition—and, of course, because he knew so much about them he was sacked after a year.

The right hon. Gentleman asked an important question this afternoon—a question that should put us all into one category or another. It is not "Do we wish to abolish means-testing 100 per cent., or to means-test every benefit", but "Are we moving in one direction or in the other?" Are we committed to the national insurance system, regarding means-testing as an exception—a necessary exception but an expensive one, not merely in terms of public expenditure but, above all, in terms of social and economic costs—or do we want to wind down that contributory system, replacing it with a means-tested society?

As has been made clear in debates that we have had in the House over several months—if the slightest doubt or ambiguity remained, it would have been dissipated by today's debate—there is a seminal division among hon. Members on this vital subject. The Labour Government are moving towards a means-tested society, while we are proud to be the defenders of the tradition of national insurance.

Mr. Pond: Was the hon. Gentleman also proud of the fact that his Government were clearly moving in the direction of means-testing, whose extent they doubled?

Mr. Davies: All these tactics are crafted in Walworth road. One of the principles contained in the handbook that I have not seen—I do not think that I would find it very attractive reading—is that those faced with an awkward statistic should distort it, and that is what has happened this afternoon.

Before I reply to the substance of the hon. Gentleman's intervention, I should point out that I am in a poor position either to take credit for the undoubted achievements of the last Administration or to defend what others may consider to have been that Administration's shortcomings. [HON. MEMBERS: "Why?"] Because I was not a member of that Administration.

Nevertheless, I will grapple with the issue raised by the hon. Gentleman. Perhaps he is a victim; perhaps he has been bamboozled by the stuff coming out of Walworth road, and is not trying to bamboozle the House. I prefer that charitable interpretation.

The statistical point that the hon. Member for Gravesham makes reflects the fact that the last Conservative Administration introduced a number of new means-tested benefits, particularly for deprived and disabled people, and greatly extended family credit, which is a means-tested benefit and was a sensible addition to the panoply of instruments available to our welfare system. Of course, that produces a statistical increase in the total proportion of social security spending by way of means-tested benefits. It is emphatically not the same thing as what the Government whom he supports are doing, which is to means-test previously non-means-tested benefits.

That is what the Government have done with bereavement benefit. Widow's benefit, as it used to be called, has been abolished. It is now a new means-tested

benefit. That is what they have done with incapacity benefit and what they are doing with the minimum income guarantee. Running down the national insurance system, as they are doing, taking non-means-tested benefits and means-testing them is totally different from what the last Conservative Administration did, which was to preserve the national insurance system and to add to it by discreet and targeted additional means-tested benefits. If the hon. Member for Gravesham cannot tell the difference between those entirely different approaches, I am surprised that someone of such intelligence should have managed to spend so long on the Select Committee.

I have not finished with the Government yet because we cannot allow the debate to conclude without receiving some answers on what is happening with the national insurance recording system computer. The best the Government can ever do is say, "It is all the last lot's fault." It is no good saying, "It wasn't us wot signed the contract." That was roughly the excuse from the Secretary of State. The fact is that problems began to arise when the Labour Government had already been in office for about a year.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): Rubbish.

Mr. Davies: The hon Gentleman may say that, but if I am wrong—if the problems began to manifest themselves earlier than or from May 1997—the point that I am about to make is greatly reinforced: in their first 18 months of office, we heard absolutely nothing from the Government about them. If it were true that, as soon as they came to office, they identified those problems, it was a dereliction of duty on the part of the hon. Gentleman or his predecessor not to come to the House and to say, "We have hit a major problem."

Had the Minister or his predecessor had the good sense to do so in the summer of 1997, there would have been some credibility in saying, "It's not our fault guv. It's the fault of the last lot," but we heard nothing. There was no statement to the House. We heard nothing until we received the circular letter of last September, when the Secretary of State said that the problems would be solved within two weeks—some two weeks. *[Interruption.]* I hope that the right hon. Gentleman is not saying sotto voce that he did not say that, because we have it in writing. We will pass it across the Box to him if he has forgotten the injudicious use of words that he resorted to last September.

In fact, earlier this afternoon, the Secretary of State was not lying when he said, "It is not my fault. It is the people who advised me. I said it on advice." That was the phrase that I heard him use earlier.

Mr. Rendel: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Davies: No. It is too late to take any more interventions. I have taken a large number, as the hon. Gentleman will recognise.

For better or for worse—it is no doubt for worse—the Secretary of State is now in charge. He cannot go on like this. He is ultimately responsible for the people who give him advice. If he is receiving such dumb advice, there may be something wrong with his information technology advisers, as well as with Andersen Consulting, which set up the computer.

If such a problem were to arise in a business, one person would be put in charge. We want to know who really is in charge: is it the Secretary of State or one of his junior Ministers? One would hope that whoever was in charge would spend time knocking heads together; that there would be a precise plan on action to be taken; when it was to be taken and by whom; and that there would be a weekly report on the desk of the Secretary of State about what was going on. If there is such a report, the House deserves to see it. We are dealing with a massive waste of public money and a cause of enormous anxiety to millions of people.

I endorse the demands of the Liberal Democrats that the estates of pensioners who die before they have received the money that they are entitled to should be fully compensated and that widows who have made the wrong choice between a state retirement pension and widow's benefit because a material fact was not available should be able to change their choice.

I have another even more important demand. Those who have lost because their SERPS rebates have been underpaid into personal pensions should be put in the financial position that they would have been in had the Government not made the mistake. That is what would happen with pension mis-selling or other abuses or inefficiencies in the private sector. If people have missed the turn in the market because money should have been paid to them in September or October, since when the stock market has appreciated, they should be compensated, as they would be if such a mistake were made by a bank, a stockbroker or an insurance company. I hope that we shall have an assurance on that.

I have one final point that is of great concern to us all. A Department of Social Security questionnaire is being sent out—I hope that the Minister will tell us whether it is being sent to everyone who currently receives child benefit or only to a selection of people—that clearly lays the basis for the taxation of child benefit. It asks many questions that are irrelevant to the administration of child benefit, including questions about the so-called partner of the recipient. What is the status of the questionnaire? Is there a statutory obligation on the recipient of child benefit to answer it? Will their statutory right to child benefit be withdrawn, as is threatened at the end of the document, if those intrusive questions are left unanswered?

6.2 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): I was going to start my response by saying that we had had a good, thoughtful, quiet and considered debate on the benefit uprating orders and the welfare reform context that the Government have set for social security. We had, until the contribution of the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies). He displayed a compassion for the poor that was notably absent from the policies of the Conservatives during 18 years in government.

The hon. Gentleman talked about means-testing, as though the Labour Government had a runaway policy to abandon the contributory principle and move to means-testing. Let us remind the House what happened when the Conservatives were in power. When they came to power, 16 per cent. of benefits were means-tested. When they left power, 34 per cent. of benefits were

[Mr. Hugh Bayley]

means-tested. If the hon. Gentleman were doing his job as an Opposition spokesman he would have seen the answer—

Mr. Quentin Davies: The hon. Gentleman is making a point that was made by his Back Benches in an intervention to my speech a few moments ago. He was obviously not listening to my response. He is drawing an inference from a statistical fact that comes from the Conservative Government introducing new means-tested benefits, but not running down existing contributory benefits. The difference between us and the Labour Government is that they are means-testing benefits that were previously not means-tested.

Mr. Bayley: The hon. Gentleman seems to have forgotten that unemployment benefit—a contributory benefit—was withdrawn by the Conservative Government. He might like to look at the video of the part of his speech in which he was running down the record on means-testing of a previous Conservative Government in a way that would attract the sympathy of many of my hon. Friends, and see the expression on the face of the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), who did not appear to follow his argument point by point.

The hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford should also look at the written answer yesterday from the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle) showing that it was not just a general move towards means-testing over an 18-year period. In the final four years of the Conservative Government the proportion of the social security budget spent on means-tested benefits increased each year, but it has decreased slightly—by less than 1 per cent.—under Labour.

To create a myth that the Labour Government are abandoning the contributory principle and moving to means-testing is not supported by the facts. The hon. Gentleman should look at the facts before making a charge.

In our 1997 election manifesto, we made a pledge to modernise the welfare state. Under the Conservatives social security spending had almost doubled. It had risen by £43,000 million a year in real terms, yet despite that increase inequality and insecurity continued to rise. By 1997 one child in three in Britain was born into a family that depended upon income support and the means-tested benefits to which the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford referred.

The social security system that we inherited is failing the very people it was meant to help. We cannot tolerate the status quo and keep the system as it is. We need to change it for economic, social and moral reasons. Right across government we are committed to change—to tackle the root causes of social exclusion and economic insecurity.

It is important to be clear about the Government's approach to welfare. Unlike our predecessors, we see welfare as much more than DSS benefits. In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) we want a modern, effective welfare state providing a mix of cash and services administered nationally by the whole spectrum of Government Departments and locally by statutory, voluntary and private agencies. We see each part of that welfare state as interdependent so that the provision of education, skills and training promotes employability. Over time, investment in jobs and social security will reduce inequalities in health.

Our approach to the machinery of government, for example, the creation of the social exclusion unit, will tackle the manifestations of social exclusion such as crime and truancy by targeting the available resources where they are most needed

The hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green, who I got to know well in the previous Parliament when we were both members of the Select Committee on Health, made the charge that transferring the Contributions Agency will undermine the contributory principle. The decision to transfer the agency to the Inland Revenue is not an attack on the contributory principle; it is a sensible reform that will enable businesses and individuals to sort out their tax and national insurance with a single organisation. I should point out to the hon. Gentleman that the Inland Revenue already collects 95 per cent. of national insurance contributions.

The hon. Members for Chingford and Woodford Green and for Grantham and Stamford both waved at the Chamber the Benefits Agency questionnaire on child benefit. The point of that questionnaire is to support the Government's programme and ensure that benefits go to those who are clearly entitled to them. I am surprised that they should make a big issue of our determination and our action to ensure that benefits are properly paid.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood spoke about disability living allowance. I know that she has taken a close interest in that benefit. I would like to associate myself with the tribute that she paid to the staff of the DLA headquarters in her constituency. She welcomed the extension of the higher rate mobility component of DLA to three and four-year-olds and argued that it should perhaps be extended further, to younger children.

The award of DLA is based on need, and the higher rate mobility component is designed to provide support to those who need assistance to go out and about. Children under the age of three would not normally go out and about without assistance or supervision, so we have responded to the case for reducing the age at which eligibility starts, but we do not think that it would be right to reduce it below the age of three.

I am glad that my hon. Friend also welcomed our decision to replace the benefit integrity project. She stressed the need to give adequate training to the staff who carry out the reviews. That is one reason why the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) is wrong to suggest that the Government could simply have torn up the project and replaced it overnight, without ensuring that the replacement works better than the original and that the staff who implement it are properly trained for the job.

Mr. Rendel: The Minister has entirely misinterpreted what I said, which was that the project, which the Government admitted had failed, should simply have been stopped, and that they could then have introduced a new

programme when they had done the training. I did not say that a new programme had to start straight away, before the training had been done.

Mr. Bayley: I find that a disingenuous argument. I should have hoped that the Liberal party would have agreed that it is important to review all benefits to ensure that they are being paid properly. Simply to abandon that for a period would not be helpful. The hon. Gentleman should recognise that, whereas the benefit integrity project did not work fairly, we are introducing a system that will be fair because it will enable benefits to be increased as well as reduced. The intention of the project that we inherited from our predecessors was, of course, purely reduction.

The hon. Gentleman asked how many pensioners we estimated would not get our minimum income guarantee because they would not claim it. It is impossible to answer that, but the Department estimates that at present between 400,000 and 700,000 pensioners who might be entitled to income support do not claim it.

The hon. Gentleman made several costly spending pledges, which I presume are part of his party leadership bid, so I will not comment on them. More importantly, he mentioned the difficulties with the NIRS project and, quite correctly, laid the blame fairly and squarely at the door of our predecessors. He asked what would happen if a pensioner was found to have been underpaid after that person had died. The answer, simply and straightforwardly, is that the underpayment would be paid to that person's estate under existing departmental procedures.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Newbury on raising issues to do with the orders—unlike the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green, who made an engaging speech but did not talk about the orders at all. The hon. Member for Newbury misunderstood what the orders say in relation to families with children on income support. The family premium has been raised so that claimants on income support will receive a full uprating.

My hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton) raised the case of her constituent, Mr. Smith. I cannot respond in the House to a particular case, and I must remind my hon. Friend that the self-employed have never been entitled to contributory jobseeker's allowance—or unemployment benefit before that—and that their levels of contributions have reflected that. However, she made an important point about the way in which the nature of society and work has changed in the past decade. That underlines the importance of us reforming the benefits and welfare system so that it responds to present-day needs.

The hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) and my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Mr. Pond) referred to the contributory principle. The Government have not abandoned the contributory principle. The orders, I would have thought, make that clear, as they include upratings of universal, contributory and means-tested benefits. In some respects, the Government are reinforcing the contributory principle. Our proposal to introduce benefits for widowers is the creation of a new contributory benefit. Our decision to link incapacity benefit more closely to national insurance contributions is a reinforcement of a contributory benefit.

Mr. Duncan Smith: That is twisted.

Mr. Bayley: It is not twisted—it is a reinforcement of the contributory principle.

Mr. Quentin Davies: The Minister is plumbing new depths—it is extremely worrying. He knows perfectly well that incapacity benefit is now completely means-tested beyond £50 a week, and that the bereavement benefit is means-tested beyond six months for both women and men. It does the House no service to try to disguise those facts.

Mr. Bayley: We are proposing adjustments to make a fairer system and to target the benefits budget on those who are in greatest need.

The hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire referred to the Acheson report. It is important to tackle poverty, and the Government are doing so. That is reflected by the orders. The introduction of a minimum income guarantee for pensioners is tackling poverty, as is the biggest-ever increase in child benefit. Underlying our policies is the recognition that the best guarantor of security is work, and work is being encouraged by the Government through the working families tax credit. We are making sure that work pays, with the minimum wage, and we are making it easier for people without work, but who want to work, to get work by creating a single gateway to ease the passage off benefits and into work.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins) made a powerful speech on pensions. He was right to give a hale and hearty welcome to the Government's minimum income guarantee, which will increase the income of a single pensioner on income support by nearly £5 a week, and the income of a couple by more than £7 a week. He raised his concern at the different treatment of the two main types of funeral bonds. That is an important point, and I give an undertaking that the Department will look at it further.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham supported the principle that claimants should be required to attend an interview with a personal adviser at the single gateway. That is an important part of the welfare-to-work strategy. It is, as my hon. Friend said, perfectly reasonable, given the existing requirement that claimants supply information by completing application forms. It underlines the point that all citizens, claimants and others, have responsibilities of citizenship as well as rights.

The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) made a good and disarmingly honest speech. He acknowledged that, under this Government, social security expenditure is not rising as fast as it did under the Conservatives. I hope that he will explain that to the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green, who suggested that this Government would spend £37 billion more on social security. That is simply not the case: the figures for the previous Government's spending do not cover the same period as this Government's triennial review.

Mr. Duncan Smith: We must be absolutely certain about this matter, and the Secretary of State must allow

[Mr. Duncan Smith]

the Under-Secretary to think it through himself. I have a specific question. The Under-Secretary has just said that the figure of £37 billion for the increase in social security spending over the next three years is incorrect. Will he confirm that the Government will not increase social security spending by £37 billion over the next three years?

Mr. Bayley: No, the figure of £37 billion is not correct. Let me explain the matter to the hon. Gentleman. Under the previous Government, social security spending rose by 4 per cent. per year. Under this Government, it will rise by about 2 per cent. per year.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh, West (Mr. Gorrie) made some points about housing benefit. I can tell him that an interdepartmental review of the housing benefit system, of the type that he favours, is under way. He argued that the system should be simpler, but I caution him that a simpler system inevitably will bring rougher justice. I know that he would be the first to complain about the creation of new anomalies. The system cannot be simplified without creating certain further anomalies.

The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs was sceptical about the new deal and the single gateway. I believe that he and other Opposition Members underestimate the extent to which our thinking has broken with the past. We are investing £4 billion in the new deal to create job opportunities. We have introduced the national minimum wage, which will benefit about 2 million people, most of whom will be women on low wages. Through the working families tax credit, we will ensure that work pays.

Our strategy is based on the recognition that people who are worn down and written off by a life of social exclusion, to which the previous Government said that there was no alternative, will require active support and help to get back into work and to feel part of society again. That is what our single work focused gateway is intended to provide—a single place where a claimant can get advice on benefits and on finding work, and on how to cross the bridge from benefits to work.

No longer will great swathes of society be written off when they would prefer to work and when what they need is a helping hand to get work. Our guiding principle of work for those who can work is indeed a break with the past. We treat unemployment as something that can be overcome by promoting employability. We do not agree that unemployment is a sad but inevitable consequence of the economic cycle. The progress with the new deal so far shows that results can be achieved—and achieve results we shall. One of the reasons for the increase in social security under this Government being lower than under our predecessors is that we are enabling more people to get off benefits and into work.

Our guiding principle is work for those who can work, and security for those who cannot. The second part is firmly rooted in the past, as our uprating orders show. We are providing an extra £1.25 billion for all families with children, and an extra £2.5 billion for the poorest pensioners. By agreeing the uprating orders, the House would agree the largest ever increase in child benefit. For the eldest child, the increase will be £2.95 a week, 45p of which takes account of inflation. The £2.50 remainder is a real-terms increase, and a direct investment that will increase security for families with children.

The increase this year for a two-child family is greater than all the increases provided by the Conservatives year after year during the previous Parliament. This year's increase—never mind last year's—in child benefit for a single child is more than twice the size of all the increases that the Conservatives made over five years.

Mr. Leigh: The Minister will therefore want to reassure us that what he is giving with one hand, his friends at the Treasury will not take back with the other.

Mr. Bayley: The hon. Gentleman will be aware of what the Chancellor said in the Budget last year. There is no proposal at the moment to tax child benefit.

There has, perhaps inevitably, been no consensus during our wide-ranging debate, but it is clear, at least to Labour, that we must proceed with the welfare reform debate. We are committed to change, but it must be change rooted in fairness, and it must provide opportunities for people who are currently denied work.

I hope that the House will welcome the orders. They provide protection and continuing security for claimants, and a record increase for recipients of child benefit, emphasising that the Government put first the needs of children. They also provide the minimum income guarantee for the most vulnerable pensioners, and that will provide a substantial boost to weekly income—almost £5 a week for single pensioners, and £7 a week for couples. They will also add to dignity and security in retirement. I commend the orders to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Social Security (Contributions) (Re-rating and National Insurance Fund Payments) Order 1999, which was laid before this House on 13th January, be approved.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Resolved,

That the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 1999, which was laid before this House on 13th January, be approved.—*[Mr. Darling.]*

PENSIONS

Resolved,

That the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 1999, which was laid before this House on 13th January, be approved.—*[Mr. Darling.]*

SOCIAL SECURITY

Resolved,

That the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating (No. 2) Order 1999, which was laid before this House on 26th January, be approved.—*[Mr. Darling.]*

COMPANIES

Resolved,

That the Open-Ended Investment Companies (Investment Companies with Variable Capital) (Fees) Regulations 1998 (S.I., 1998, No. 3087), dated 9th December 1998, a copy of which was laid before this House on 10th December, be approved.

That the Companies (Fees) (Amendment) Regulations 1998 (S.I., 1998, No. 3088), dated 9th December 1998, a copy of which was laid before this House on 10th December, be approved.—*[Mr. Kevin Hughes.]*

POLICE

Resolved,

That the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (Codes of Practice No. 5) Order 1998, dated 8th December 1998, a copy of which was laid before this House on 15th December, be approved.—*[Mr. Kevin Hughes.]*

LEGAL AID AND ADVICE

Resolved,

That the draft Legal Aid (Prescribed Panels) Regulations 1998, which were laid before this House on 16th December, be approved.—*[Mr. Kevin Hughes.]*

HMS Glorious

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Kevin Hughes.]*

6.28 pm

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): On the afternoon of 8 June 1940, two German battle cruisers, Scharnhorst and Gneisenau, sighted a wisp of smoke on the arctic horizon. Two hours later, the carrier HMS Glorious and her two escorting destroyers, Ardent and Acasta, had been sunk. More than 1,500 lives were lost, qualifying the incident as one of the worst naval disasters of the second world war.

I have no direct personal link with the tragedy, but some of my constituents do. A cousin of mine was close by, serving as a rating in the escort party to the Norwegian royal family and the diplomatic corps as they embarked for evacuation on HMS Devonshire, which features in the story that I am about to unfold. He was never able to tell me about these events, because he was lost with almost the entire complement of HMS Hood a year later, another tragedy with a similarly massive loss of life.

My constituent Mr. Sam Farrington lost his brother, who was only 17 when he went down with the Glorious. Another constituent of mine was Captain Nick Barker, who died not long after retiring to Northumberland. He famously commanded HMS Endurance at the time of the Falklands war. He lost his father, Lieutenant Commander Ben Barker, who was in command of HMS Ardent. Nick's son produced a television programme about the event, which appeared in the "Secret History" series on Channel 4.

Those family members, and others, have written to me from all over the country, and they have convinced me that the official history of the tragedy needs to be revised to take account of what has subsequently come to light.

For many years, those people have been deeply troubled by the belief that the loss of their loved ones has not been properly explained. No one is looking, after all these years, for blame or retribution, but where a supreme sacrifice has been made on such a scale, the record should surely be as accurate as possible. An unconvincing explanation produced in conditions of war should no longer be given unchallenged official approval.

The families have aroused the interest of several hon. Members. The hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), who is here, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Mr. Oaten) and the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) have all spoken or written to me. The Admiralty, and now the Ministry of Defence, always maintained that the sinkings were merely an unfortunate accident of war. A significant number of naval historians continue to suggest what the few survivors and the relatives have long suspected—that a catalogue of errors and misjudgments culminated in the tragic events of that afternoon.

On 8 June, HMS Glorious and its two escorting destroyers were heading for Scapa Flow, having left the coast of northern Norway that morning. At about 4 o'clock, two German battle cruisers were spotted on the starboard horizon. Unable to launch its protective aircraft into the wind without turning straight towards the enemy, Glorious sent out her first radio signal at 16.15, fired up

[Mr. A. J. Beith]

the boilers, which had been shut down, and slowly increased to full speed in an attempt to run to the south-east.

Shortly afterwards, one of the battle cruisers opened fire with terrifying accuracy. Following several direct hits, the order to abandon ship was eventually given at about 17.20. Ardent was sunk at 17.28, and at 18.08 Acasta joined her. The bravery of the men of the doomed destroyers was later vividly praised by German crew members from the Scharnhorst. In the programme, one was quoted as saying:

"Our flags flew at half mast and the whole bridge stood to attention because of the courage of the English sailors".

Only 41 survivors were picked up after two days in the icy waters.

Two Members of Parliament who suspected that the sinkings might not have been only another tragic accident of war first expressed disquiet about the explanation for what had happened in this House in the summer of 1940. In 1946, when morale and security were no longer paramount with the war over, Labour MP Richard Stokes asked the First Lord of the Admiralty

"when the promised report on the loss of H.M.S. "Glorious" and her attendant destroyers will be published.—[*Official Report*, 8 May 1946; Vol. 422, c. 1050.]

Pressure was growing in the Admiralty for a full inquiry into the sinking, but in a memorandum that came to light many years later, R. Powell, head of military branch, advised strongly against a detailed investigation. He wrote:

"A full report at this date would make very dismal reading and would invite Mr. Stokes or other MPs to ask why this or that was not done."

We are still asking those questions 60 years later.

The official account given by the Admiralty in *Hansard* on 8 May 1946 has remained almost unaltered to this day. It has frequently been criticised by naval historians and some naval officers for raising opinion and conjecture to the level of fact and for failing to give an adequate explanation of the main areas of controversy.

Why was Glorious returning home independently of the main convoy? Why was she so badly prepared? Why was her air power not used even for reconnaissance? Was there not sufficient intelligence about German activity in the region to suggest that Glorious should have been in a much greater state of readiness? Could HMS Devonshire have helped the stricken vessel or did its commander have no idea of what was happening?

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): I welcome profoundly the fact that the right hon. Gentleman has raised this matter. If they still exist, should not the orders of the Commander-in-Chief, of the Home Fleet be made available? That would be important, because the film put the captain in a bad light. I wonder whether that is fair.

Mr. Beith: Those are among the records that should be readily available to the naval historical branch. The point can be pursued after the debate.

The list of those who cast doubt on the explanation of the Admiralty and the MOD is distinguished. It is headed by the First Sea Lord of the day, Admiral of the Fleet Sir Dudley Pound, who in 1940 questioned whether Glorious was suitably prepared for such an encounter. Aware from survivors that she had no reconnaissance aircraft aloft, no aircraft ready on deck, and no proper lookouts, and that her crew were at only the fourth level of readiness, he wrote in an Admiralty file:

"Glorious seems to have forgotten that she was a Man o' War"

—a comment that hardly sits comfortably with the official explanation that the disaster was due to a series of misfortunes rather than errors. A naval historian later wrote:

"An aircraft carrier not operating her aircraft is one of the most helpless things afloat."

In 1948, in his history of the second world war, Winston Churchill expressed his doubts about the reason given for HMS Glorious leaving the relative safety of a convoy of ships to head home independently. The official reason, still expressed today, is that the ship needed to return to Britain because she was running low on fuel. Churchill wrote:

"This explanation is not convincing. The Glorious presumably had enough fuel to steam at the speed of the convoy."

In 1970, Captain Roskill, who had earlier written the Navy's official and authoritative war history, expressed his view about why Glorious left the convoy. Following preliminary research, he wrote a letter to a senior member of the staff at the Royal Naval Staff College at Greenwich and said:

"the shortage of fuel theory is bunkum".

Ten years later and after much more detailed work, he took the debate further in a long article that appeared in *The Times*. He stated:

"The answer is distressing. The Admiralty has tried to suppress the truth for 40 years, but it looks as though 1,515 men were killed partly as a result of a whole chain of Admiralty errors".

The same man, 20 years earlier, had been charged with the responsibility of writing the official history of the Royal Navy.

The MOD's naval historical branch, apparently unaware that Roskill had changed his mind about what happened, used his official war history as recently as 1997 to support its theory that a lack of fuel was fundamental to Glorious's decision to depart from Norway. There has never been supporting evidence that fuel was the reason for Glorious's independent return from Norway. The arithmetic of Glorious's ton-mile figures would seem to torpedo the MOD's certainty. Furthermore, if a ship is low on fuel—as Glorious was, with up to a third of her boilers shut down—she cannot raise full power and speed in an emergency. She was a lightly armed and thinly armoured second world war carrier, but she should not have proceeded independently. Had she remained under the protection of other warships, she would have been steaming at convoy speed, which would have consumed less fuel.

The truth may lie in a different direction. HMS Glorious may well have become detached from the greater safety of the convoy because of a serious breakdown in relations among her senior officers. She was an unhappy ship. Her commander, D'Oyly Hughes, was a brave and distinguished veteran of submarine warfare in the 1914–18 war, but he seems to have been unsuited to commanding a carrier. He was ill at ease with the role of air power at sea and seemed unable to work with officers

experienced in, and responsible for, air operations from his ship. Tensions ran high. After a major dispute he put ashore his Commander, Flying, J.B. Heath, and was preparing to court martial both Heath and Lieutenant Commander Slessor. Lieutenant Commander Slessor had written a despairing letter to his wife saying,

"J.B. and I are in great trouble. I can't tell you the story but you'll guess the cause of it. It was bound to come sooner or later I suppose, and perhaps it's a good thing. I needn't tell where right lies, nor that my conscience is absolutely clear, but we do need your thoughts and prayers very much."

That was a message from a man serving on a very unhappy ship.

Lieutenant Commander Slessor perished in the sinking. Commander Heath was cleared of all charges and continued his distinguished service in other sectors, finishing as Commanding Officer of HMS Heron at Yeovilton.

In 1968, Commander Le Geyt, one-time captain of the destroyer Diana, wrote in an Admiralty file that he had seen Glorious send a long signal by lamp to her Admiral in Ark Royal asking permission

"to part company and proceed ahead to Scapa Flow for the purposes of making preparations for the impending courts martial."

Why would that signal have been sent if fuel was really the reason for Glorious to leave the convoy? D'Oyly Hughes' known state of mind and the implausibility of the fuel theory lend credibility to the alternative explanation.

In 1978, Sir Harry Hinsley, an historian and vice-chancellor of Cambridge, wrote the official story of British intelligence in world war two. He states that, during the 10 days prior to the Glorious' sinking, Bletchley Park—where, as a young man, he analysed German naval wireless traffic—repeatedly informed the Admiralty that analysis of the traffic indicated that German "main units" were likely to emerge from the Baltic and proceed to Norwegian waters. He tells how that intelligence was ignored and consequently, in his words:

"The Glorious was caught unprepared".

In attempting to counter Sir Harry, the MOD's naval historical branch drew attention to what it felt was an inconsistency between his more recent comments and those found in his official history. The NHB pointed to a sentence in that history which reads:

"It is not difficult to understand the Admiralty's scepticism. Traffic Analysis was an untested technique and one that yielded only broad and inferential clues."

What the MOD did not draw attention to was Sir Harry's very next sentence, which reads:

"But . . . although the evidence of Traffic Analysis was unsupported by other indications, the (Navy's) Operational Intelligence Office had no good reason for resisting Bletchley Park's suggestion that it should at least issue a qualified warning to the Fleet."

That differs sharply from the MOD's 1997 comment paper, called "Points of Controversy", which asserts:

"There was no indication from any source that a powerful German squadron was preparing for a sortie."

That statement is wrong. At this point, we are not arguing about alternative theories; it is a matter of fact, and the comment paper should be corrected on that point. In a letter written shortly before he died last year, Sir Harry wrote:

"The Admiralty later realised that it had made a mistake".

Indeed, it was his view that lessons were learnt from the mistake and that much greater attention was given to the results of traffic analysis thereafter, with considerable benefit gained.

What of events surrounding the incident itself? Glorious sent several signals during the engagement, but the MOD has claimed that, although the nearby HMS Devonshire did pick up one of those signals, it was "garbled", "corrupt" and "almost unintelligible". The Devonshire was under instructions to maintain radio silence. On board were the King of Norway and the Norwegian Cabinet, so there are legitimate questions as to what she could have done to help the stricken vessel. However, that radio silence was broken 12 hours later, when Devonshire checked on an expected escort. More important is that five members of Devonshire's crew have testified that the signals from Glorious were far from unintelligible. Despite differing in the detail, all five were adamant that the signal was sufficiently clear to cause considerable consternation on Devonshire's bridge.

At 16.25, Devonshire's log states, "Exercised main armament"—the first time that all her 8-in turrets had been exercised in more than a month, and at almost the same time as a petty officer on Devonshire claims that he received an audible signal from Glorious. To man all one's 8-in guns is indicative of a perceived surface threat, as they are not much use against aeroplanes. The official explanation for the exercising of the main armaments has been that it was coincidental to the time of Glorious' signals. That seems too much of a coincidence.

Similarly odd is that, during her passage of 1,300 miles, Devonshire travelled at almost top speed only once. That occurred within four minutes of Glorious' last signal at 17.19, just before she was sunk, when Devonshire's log states "Increased to 30 knots", which was probably her maximum speed, and for seven minutes "Negative zig-zag". That speed was held for two hours, until she reduced to 26 knots. Why did she accelerate if she found the signal "unintelligible" and—according to the Admiralty—did not even know where Glorious was? Would she not have feared that, by doing so, she was accelerating into danger? The MOD has suggested that the unusual behaviour demonstrated by Devonshire that afternoon was coincidental to Glorious' signals, but it seems more likely that she gleaned sufficient information from a supposedly "almost unintelligible" signal to be worried about something.

Those who inquire of the MOD what actually happened that afternoon will be sent a paper called "Points of Controversy". The covering letter states that there is

"sufficient collateral evidence received by this department from key participants to permit reasonable conclusions to be drawn and convincing explanations to be given for the sequence of events."

I suggest that there are reasonable conclusions and convincing explanations—long advanced by respected naval historians—that are different from those advanced to this day by the MOD.

Two of the key participants in the covering letter were Fleet Air Arm squadron commanding officers in Ark Royal. One of them, Commander Casson, denies that he was involved in any way in any of the decisions or actions surrounding Glorious's early departure for home or in the subsequent circumstances of her sinking. He was not even asked by the MOD if he could be cited as a key participant, and he expressed surprise when he found out

[Mr. Beith]

that the MOD was using him as a supporting witness. Commander Casson's colleague was no closer to the seat of decision making that day. In short, while both may have valid contributions to make on Fleet Air Arm practice and procedures of the 1940s, neither was involved, directly or indirectly, in what happened.

One of the other key participants was Stanley Rogers, a telegraphist on Devonshire, who testifies that he heard nearly all of Glorious's enemy report. The MOD, by contrast, claims that the signalman supports its contention that the signal was almost unintelligible. He wrote to the MOD in an effort to set the record straight. The recollections of another key participant, who was also a signalman, are also at variance with the MOD's account.

The covering letter sent by the MOD also states that official conclusions have been reached following

"exhaustive analysis of all available records."

It has subsequently become clear that that really means analysis of all official records—those held by the Admiralty. For example, it does not include the Roskill papers in the Churchill archives in Cambridge, which are a good source of information containing all of Roskill's research into the controversy.

As well as the First Sea Lord of the day, Winston Churchill, and later, the Navy's official war historian, there are other well-known naval historians such as John Winton, Julian Thompson and Correlli Barnett, who maintain that the official version lacks credibility.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): Is there any evidence, other than the hearsay evidence provided by the MOD connected with receipts of signals by Devonshire, that the signalling equipment in HMS Glorious was defective?

Mr. Beith: I know of no such evidence, although there is testimony as to the difficulty of reading some of the signals. However, there is strong evidence that they were far from unintelligible, both in the recollections that I have quoted and the fact that there appears to have been a response by Devonshire to what must have been worrying indications in those signals.

As I was saying, several well-known naval historians have cast doubt on the official version. They ask other questions that are too numerous to raise in a short debate. I cannot believe that the Ministry of Defence would suggest that it has, in its in-house naval historical branch, a monopoly of competent or credible naval historians, or that they are uniquely qualified to arrive at the true version of what happened.

I have great respect for the knowledge and diligence of those in the naval historical branch and the care that they have taken in responding to letters from me and in assisting Ministers to do so in the two years that I have been involved in the matter. However, they can be wrong or, as in this case, too zealous in defending conclusions reached in more difficult times with less information than we have now.

The sinking of HMS Glorious and her escort ships took place almost 60 years ago. Definitive conclusions may never be reached. All the surviving evidence is freely available, yet respected naval historians have consistently come to conclusions different from those of the MOD. The few remaining survivors and the relatives of those who were lost, many of whom have written to me, are entitled to an open and public recognition in the official account that there are other viable explanations for what happened.

It is perverse and harmful to go on defending an explanation in which hardly a knowledgeable person outside the Ministry of Defence believes. I hope that the Minister will tonight recognise the need to put the record straight as far as possible and, in doing so, to give the naval historical branch the brief to consider all relevant records, not just official records.

6.49 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): The House owes a debt to the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) for raising this subject.

I shall explain my own locus in this matter, such as it is. As a child, I repeatedly saw Glorious in the Firth of Forth, because she was often based at Rosyth. My parents had friends on the ship. I recollect their extreme distress when it was sunk, since many of the crew who had been with the ship since 1938 or 1939 were on board.

I ought to declare two other loci. I was taught by the late and wonderful Sir Harry Hinsley, who talked about this matter. I used to go to see him, especially during the Falklands war and afterwards, in the master's lodge of St. John's college, Cambridge. That relationship lasted until he died. I was also a student friend of Tim Slessor who, along with Mr. Harrison, has done so much work on the film. I was very sorry for Captain D'Oyly Hughes's daughter, who was obviously put in a very difficult position over the film, and naturally came to her father's defence.

I should like to put gently—it is very difficult to be wise after the event—a point made by Tim Slessor, which I have given in writing to the Minister and his advisers:

"The MOD tries to have it both ways. In the Under Secretary's letters, it claims to have nothing stronger than 'reasonable conclusions' and 'convincing explanations'. In the MOD's 7-page paper 'HMS Glorious—Points of Controversy' it goes much further; it is firm and quite unequivocal in its assertions. For example, on the matter of intelligence available about likely German warship movements into Norwegian waters, the MOD paper claims: 'there was no indication from any source that a powerful German squadron was preparing to sortie, let alone that one had been at sea since 4 June'. This is in direct contradiction to the Official History of British Intelligence (HMSO 1978—page 141) by Sir Harry Hinsley: 'A fortnight before the German battle cruisers made their sortie, Bletchley Park began to report to the Admiralty that German main units were preparing to move from the Baltic northwards up the Norwegian coast . . . The Admiralty had no good reason for resisting the suggestion that it should at least issue a qualified warning to the fleet . . . Glorious was caught unprepared'. This is many miles from the MOD claim that 'There was no indication from any source'.

I ought to add that I was also taught by the late Sir Frank Adcock, who was also a decryptor at Bletchley, and who had perfect knowledge of German, which he had studied in Berlin under Williamwitz Nöllendorf. Sir Frank later edited the "Cambridge Ancient History". In his discussions about Bletchley, Adcock again referred to hindsight. I never put Hinsley's and Adcock's accounts together, although Hinsley was sometimes given to exaggeration. I suspect that we cannot regard him as an absolute, definitive source in his recollection of what he did in his youth. If we are to talk of the distant past, we ought to be a little careful.

Slessor says:

"Given that John Spellar's letter to Alan Beith (t August 1997) specifically says 'I agree that if any one of these contentions-[of which the above is just one] to which the Admiralty and the MOD have consistently adhered could be disproved, then [it] would justify public concern over the handling of the matter [the whole of the official account] from 1946 to the present day".

In a sense, there is a balance between Sir Harry Hinsley's work and that of the naval historical branch. I do not come to the conclusion that the naval historical branch is necessarily wrong, although the Minister's reply will be of very great interest.

6.54 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. John Spellar): I apologise to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and to hon. Members who have spoken and the rest of the House—although one term almost encapsulates the other—for the state of my voice. I hope that it lasts until the end of my speech.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) that we are grateful to the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) for raising the issue of the loss of HMS Glorious, HMS Ardent and HMS Acasta off the coast of Norway on 8 June 1940. Several issues were raised on which I shall need to write to the right hon. Gentleman, but I hope to reply to him on other issues during the debate.

As we all agree, the tragic loss of the Glorious was one of the greatest disasters suffered by the Royal Navy during the second world war. I am sure that hon. Members would wish to join me in expressing sympathy to the families and loved ones of those lost.

Over the years since the loss of the Glorious and her escorts, Members of the House have understandably expressed concern over the circumstances surrounding their loss. It is a sensitive issue. It is of genuine interest to the House, and interest has been revived by the recent showing and repeat of the Channel 4 documentary "Secret History"—mentioned by the right hon. Member for Berwick–upon–Tweed—about this episode. It may help if I expand further on the background that the right hon. Gentleman has provided.

The evacuation from Norway, in May 1940, took place at one of the blackest and most confused periods of the war. At that time, the German army had invaded France. British forces, including the Royal Navy, were heavily involved in these operations, which culminated in the fall of France and the evacuation of the British expeditionary force from mainland Europe. Moreover, Italy had just entered the war on the side of the Axis powers and, understandably, the risk of a German invasion was regarded as a serious threat.

The aircraft carriers Ark Royal and Glorious had sailed from Scapa Flow for Narvik, in Norway, on 31 May. Ark Royal was tasked with providing fighter cover during the withdrawal from Norway. Glorious was tasked with the evacuation of RAF aircraft from Bardufoss in the north of Norway; those aircraft would be urgently required for the defence of the United Kingdom.

At 03.00 on 8 June, having embarked the RAF Hurricanes and Gladiators, the Glorious, together with the destroyers Ardent and Acasta as anti-submarine escorts, set sail for Scapa Flow.

At about 16.00, Glorious sighted the mastheads of what we now know were the battle cruisers Scharnhorst and Gneisenau, which were on course to close on the Glorious. Ardent was ordered to investigate, and the Glorious altered course to the south. At the same time, orders were given to prepare a Swordfish reconnaissance aircraft, but it was too late, and none were airborne before the Scharnhorst opened fire at 16.31, followed shortly after by the Gneisenau. As the right hon. Member for Berwick–upon–Tweed said, the order to abandon Glorious was given at 17.20. At 17.40 Glorious sank. The Ardent sank at about 17.30. The Acasta, with great gallantry, continued to close with the enemy and succeeded in damaging the Scharnhorst, which was forced to return to Trondheim.

Understandably, and regrettably, no report of proceedings, or deck logs for May and June 1940 survived the loss of the Glorious—nor, tragically, did any officer or senior rating who was in a position to comment on navigation, operations or command decision making. Any reconstruction or analysis—I believe this would be common ground—is therefore wholly dependent on evidence given to the board of inquiry by relatively junior personnel, and external sources such as signals received during the period under review, the reports of other ships and naval authorities, and recollections of participants. In addition, we now have the unambiguous German records. Nevertheless, the picture is not complete. Inevitably, there are gaps, which cannot be filled, and that has understandably allowed room for speculation to grow about the circumstances of the loss of the vessels.

Over the years, several points of contention have been raised. I should like to make it clear that we believe that many of those arise entirely from genuine differences of interpretation. What is clear is that, when Glorious detached to return to Scapa Flow, she had already carried out the mission for which she had been despatched—the retrieval of the RAF fighters. She could make no further contribution to the safety of the evacuation convoys, which were the fleet's next main concern. It is also assumed that, after five days at sea off Norway, she had only sufficient fuel to return to base, allowing for the obligatory requirement to maintain a reserve of 33 per cent. The House may be interested to know that that figure has been increased to 60 per cent. for today's royal naval vessels. That is not just because of problems with sludge at the bottom of fuel tanks, although that is a serious consideration.

It being Seven o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Mr. Spellar: The need to maintain stability is another consideration. I asked exactly the questions that the right hon. Gentleman raised. Those are relevant technical matters, and I am satisfied with the answers.

The assumption has been challenged in recent years but there is no documentary evidence to support the attack on it. What is known is that Glorious had been at sea at considerable distance from base for six full days, and that her normal routine would have allowed her to remain at sea for only five days.

The right hon. Gentleman said that Glorious had to leave the convoy. At the time of her departure, the convoy had not formed, and if she had remained off the coast of

[Mr. Spellar]

Norway waiting for the convoy to form, fuel would certainly have been consumed and could have become an issue. In that event Glorious might not have had enough fuel to reach the United Kingdom and also to retain a prudent margin for emergencies.

Mr. Beith: Does the Minister know anyone outside the current MOD who believes that part of the theory, bearing in mind that the amount of fuel used on convoy passage at convoy speed would have been less than that required for the vessel to proceed with any hope of safety at a faster speed to make for home with only the destroyer escort?

Mr. Spellar: As I said, that would also have meant waiting for the convoy, and the possibilities had to be balanced. The question is whether the decisions were honestly made. We have to work on that assumption. There seem to be reasonable grounds for doing so. It is difficult at this distance and with the lack of records, but the assumption seems reasonable, given standard working practice in the Navy at that time, so we should not lightly discard it.

For reasons that I have explained, it is still considered likely that lack of fuel was a consideration in the decision that Glorious should return to the UK, but it is not possible to state that as a definitive fact. We have agreed that. What I can say is that even if Glorious was low on fuel, she would have been capable of raising full power and speed in an emergency.

I shall deal with the question whether the Admiralty ignored intelligence warnings about naval activity in the area. Although the right hon. Gentleman draws from the late Professor Sir Harry Hinsley, he does not make it clear that the last warning to be circulated within the Admiralty related to German ships in Norwegian waters being associated with operations in the North sea. A day later, the Glorious and the destroyers were sunk nearly 1,000 miles to the north of the North sea.

In the letter that Sir Harry wrote shortly before he died last year, to which the right hon. Gentleman referred, Sir Harry speculated:

"I think that the best evidence that the Admiralty later realised it had made a mistake in ignoring my warning lies in the fact that its relations with the naval Section at Bletchley Park changed significantly after the disaster".

That is an example of conjecture, but it may also have been selectively quoted fact.

My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) advised me that he had urgent travel arrangements and apologised to the House for the fact that he could not stay until the end of the debate. The quote from Sir Harry Hinsley's "Official History of British Intelligence" compressed quotations that were expanded by the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed—a page of text is compressed into a few lines. Among those phrases, into which comes a warning of a move from the Baltic into the Skagerrack, is a warning that ships in Norwegian waters may be associated with operations in the North sea.

I draw the attention of the House to the section which, as we heard, gives a balanced view. Sir Harry Hinsley stated that it was not difficult to understand the operational intelligence centre's scepticism that traffic analysis was an untested technique. However, as the right hon. Gentleman commented, Sir Harry stated later in the paragraph that the OIC had no good reason for resisting Bletchley's suggestion that it would issue a qualified warning. I would say to my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow that there is therefore a balance of judgment to be struck. We have to look at both sides, as did the official history.

Another main issue of speculation, which has been raised in the debate, has been the signals dispatched by Glorious and the role played by HMS Devonshire. It is known that Glorious sent two signals before it sank: the first, "enemy report", at 16.15 hours; the second, an "amplifying report" at 16.40 hours. There are no British records which record the receipt of the first signal. Receipt of the second signal is recorded. It is difficult to conceive that Devonshire would record receipt of the second signal and not the first. It is known that the first signal sent by Glorious was not received by any British vessel, although subsequent records have shown that the full text was recorded by the Gneisenau.

The text of the second "amplifying signal" was recorded by Devonshire in the admiral's record as "My 16.15. 2P/B". The time of the signal was also given. Unlike the first signal, this signal did not give the position of Glorious, nor was it stated whether the sighting was made from the ship, or if it resulted from an air sortie.

That signal did not state that the ship was under attack. Records show that the quality of the signal was poor. I suggest that the content, which was discussed on the bridge, may have puzzled the hierarchy on Devonshire, but did not provide information which would give cause for Devonshire to break radio silence.

The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed also raised the question of Captain D'Oyly Hughes and the early departure. The official documentation on that subject consists of one note—by the Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet—instructing the Glorious to proceed to Scapa Flow to conduct the court martial.

That does not automatically lead to the conclusion that Captain D'Oyly Hughes was responsible for that decision, which had to be approved by Vice-Admiral Wells. I was slightly concerned when the right hon. Gentleman questioned whether all the records were available. As far as I am aware—he should write to me if he has any information to the contrary—all the official records are available, including records from the Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet.

The right hon. Gentleman also asked whether it was coincidence that the Devonshire exercised its main armament as Glorious was transmitting the "enemy report". I have looked into that as well, and I am advised that that would appear to be so. I understand that, traditionally, the Navy uses the period between 16.00 and 18.00 for what is known as evening quarters, to exercise the gun crews. It might also be worth noting that the cruiser was already at defence watches, with three out of four turrets manned.

The right hon. Gentleman also asked whether Devonshire would have manned its main armament, because of the prospect of an attack from the air rather than an attack from the sea. I am advised that the 8-in guns of the County class cruisers were designed as dual-purpose weapons, for long-range use against aircraft

as well as surface ships. The turrets enabled a 70-deg angle of elevation, and rapid rates of slew and elevation, for anti-aircraft use. In the absence of surface ships, German long-range reconnaissance aircraft were the expected threat to the west of Norway.

There are a number of alternative theories, and we could discuss them and their merits, but I am not sure that that would serve any great purpose. Many of these issues are inevitably matters of interpretation. We believe that there is a sound basis for the interpretation that the Ministry of Defence has put forward, drawn quite properly from departmental records, and supplemented, where appropriate, from personal recollections. The severe loss of life and lack of documentation means that there is no definitive record, and no one is qualified to arrive at a true version. I am satisfied, however, that all Admiralty records relating to the incident are in the public domain.

Mr. Beith: I think the Minister took to be from me a comment made by the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) about the availability of records. I have not questioned the availability of records.

May I discourage the Minister from going wholly into defensive mode? He has suggested that there is a considerable area for speculation and disagreement.

The nub of my case is this. The paper "Points of Controversy" suggests that is so, but the text of the official report—which has, however, been slightly revised since it first appeared in *Hansard* in 1946—does not. It would greatly help the families concerned if the area of disagreement, or the potential alternative explanation, were aired more clearly in the document.

Mr. Spellar: We are satisfied that there has been no cover-up of these tragic events, and that the MOD's interpretation is soundly based. We are satisfied that it is the most likely explanation. As I have said, however, it is a question of interpretation—as we accept, honest interpretation—of different views. The problem is that there is no new evidence on which we can draw to resolve the differences.

I feel that those who criticise the MOD's interpretation of events should themselves accept that our conclusions have been honestly drawn and rigorously researched. We argued it all through, and also looked at new information, which, in some instances, led to a slight modification of our conclusions.

We provided the right hon. Gentleman with a detailed and, perhaps, complicated account of the incident in July 1997, which we believe will interest other Members. I shall arrange for it to be placed in the Library. Members who read the record of the debate will gain an impression of its nature, and of the reasons for the position taken by the MOD and the naval historical branch: an honest position that has, I think, stood the test of time.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twelve minutes past Seven o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 1 February 1999

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Concessionary Television Licences

1. **Mr. Martin Salter** (Reading, West): If the BBC funding review panel will consider the range of concessionary arrangements. [66758]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): The terms of reference for the review panel currently considering the future of the BBC licence fee after 2002 include consideration of the current structure of the concessionary licence scheme and whether a suitable alternative structure could be available.

Mr. Salter: Is my hon. Friend aware of the growing support, especially in my constituency, for our campaign to secure a fairer system of concessionary television licence fees for pensioners and others in need? Is she further aware that there is a powerful case for free television licences to be provided to the housebound—as is the case in Ireland, Austria and Germany—because for many people stuck at home the television is their only source of entertainment and contact with the outside world?

Janet Anderson: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the campaign in his constituency. The pensioners of Reading, West are very lucky to have a Member of Parliament who takes their concerns so seriously. I assure him that the Government accept that the current structure of the concessionary licence scheme is imperfect and unsatisfactory. The current review will include a detailed consideration of the arrangements and possible alternatives, but we cannot make any promises that the review will lead to a general concession for all pensioners or other groups, because that could lead to substantial increases for all other licence fee payers.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): As BBC funding is under review, may I draw the Minister's attention to an important article in *The Times* today by Roger Boyes about the possible decision by the BBC next week to close down the German service? May I urge her to make her best representations to the BBC not to take that step, given that the German service still has a following and an important role to play, especially in the former east Germany?

Janet Anderson: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that that is a matter for the Foreign Office, but we will see that his views are made known to those concerned.

National Stadium

2. **Mr. Ivor Caplin** (Hove): What progress has been made on the development of the new national stadium. [66759]

The Minister for Sport (Mr. Tony Banks): I am pleased to confirm that Wembley plc and the English National Stadium Development Company have exchanged contracts for the sale of Wembley stadium. That is good news. I hope that things can progress quickly, so that we can start building what will be one of the world's finest stadiums. A new Wembley is at the centre of our plans to host major international sporting events such as the world cup in 2006, the Olympics and the world athletics championships. The Government are determined to place Britain right at the heart of international sport, and a new national stadium will help us to do just that.

Mr. Caplin: I thank my hon. Friend for those encouraging remarks, especially about the rebuilding of Wembley stadium and its importance for 2006. Does he agree that today is a black day for football, because of the ridiculous and outrageous comments by the England team manager, which I hope will be heartily condemned on both sides of the House? Will my hon. Friend comment on the importance of regulation in football, because in the past few months we have had many instances that suggest that if we are not careful the bubble will burst? If so, we will not be able to bring the world cup here, because football will have had its time in this country. As a football supporter, I hope that I am wrong and I trust that my hon. Friend can reassure me on the issue of regulation.

Mr. Banks: My hon. Friend demonstrates by the scale of his supplementary question the feeling that sport has become one damn thing after another. On the point about Mr. Glenn Hoddle, there have been times this week when I have wondered what dreadful things I must have done in a previous life to end up as the Sports Minister in this one. I can only conclude that I was probably Vlad the Impaler and I have certainly felt all my impaling instincts coming back to me when I have surveyed the sporting scene. The words of the Prime Minister on television this morning are clear. He said that if Glenn Hoddle did make the comments as reported, it would be very difficult for him to stay. That is a matter, of course, for the Football Association and meetings are taking place. I suspect that we will get an announcement tomorrow, if not today.

Football is on a roll at the moment and many people feel that the good days will never end. However, football must bear in mind that it must build new supporters in generations to come, and taking money out of football as if there were no tomorrow is a foolish thing to do. The final report of the football task force will consider commercialisation and merchandising and, of course, the idea of a football regulator. My Department has set up a

new independent body, the quality, efficiency and standards team—or Quest—to consider the rules of governing bodies that receive public support, and we hope that that will be one of the new mechanisms that will modernise British sport and take it into the next century.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): First, the Minister will know that all hon. Members who have worked with disabled sportsmen and women over the years will understand and share the views that he has just expressed. However, to return to the matter of the national stadium: does he agree that there is one item in his "one damn thing after another" list that might help the campaigns—supported by hon. Members of all parties—to bring major international sporting events to this country and to stage them in the national stadium, when it is completed? That item is the current scandal in the International Olympic Committee. Is it not likely that our reputation for being one of the incorruptible nations in world sport will make it easier for British bids to be accepted by a new, cleaned-up IOC, and that, as a result, the national stadium will host major world sporting events in the future?

Mr. Banks: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's comments and for the support that he gives to sport in this country, especially to disabled sports. He is right to say that it is important that we present a united front in making bids for international sporting events.

This week, I shall attend the anti-doping conference in Lausanne, at which we shall discuss the question of cleaning up the IOC. I am sure that, when that clean-up is complete, cities in this country will be in a much stronger position to bid for future Olympic games.

Music (Children)

3. **Mr. Clive Efford** (Eltham): What action he has taken to widen the opportunities for children to participate in making music. [66760]

The Minister for Arts (Mr. Alan Howarth): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced last summer the creation of a new Youth Music Trust with £10 million of Arts Council lottery funding a year. From April, the trust will work to promote greater access to music making for young people. Together with the standards fund initiative announced last week by my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Culture, Media and Sport and for Education and Employment, the trust could increase by at least £180 million over the next three years the resources available for improving music-making opportunities for young people.

Mr. Efford: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the emphasis that his Department places on community and school music and I draw attention to the excellent work in my constituency of the Greenwich Youth Band and Greenwich Music Makers, which provide opportunities for young people to participate in music. Will my hon. Friend assure me that the resources being made available will take due account of community arts funding to ensure that music tuition will be available to everyone, and that no one is excluded from such tuition for reasons of cost?

Mr. Howarth: I readily underline that point, and I take this opportunity to pay my tribute to the Greenwich Youth Band. Also in my hon. Friend's constituency is Eltham college, which has a strong musical tradition. I congratulate that institution on its link with the new Masterclass Music Charitable Trust, and we greatly appreciate the contribution made by Classic FM through that new trust.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Secretary of State should now regret saying that Musicworks personifies everything that new Labour is trying to achieve in music, given that that project has had to close with debts of more than £50,000? Was not the Secretary of State merely displaying his normal, cack-handed misjudgment when he said what he did?

Mr. Howarth: It seems a shame that the hon. Gentleman should simply resort to abuse. We hope to be able to double the amount of funding for music in schools: surely that should be a matter for welcome? Does the hon. Gentleman have to crab and to dwell on the negative, especially when the negative is imaginary?

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): I thank my hon. Friend for the infusion by the Government of new moneys into music. Would it be his wish that the children involved should one day graduate to playing in our national and regional orchestras? If so, will he kindly consider the difficulties faced by the Liverpool Royal Philharmonic Orchestra which, through no fault of its own, has massive financial problems? It is underfunded and has received only a very small increase in funds. If he were able to do something about the orchestra's difficulties, schools' music in the region would benefit greatly.

Mr. Howarth: My hon. Friend is a steady and strong champion of the Liverpool Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, which is in difficulties. What is needed is a partnership between the Arts Council, North-West Arts, the relevant local authorities and other bodies. I believe that we shall be able to achieve that partnership.

I certainly join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the very remarkable achievements of our professional musicians, and to our musicians in schools. I was extraordinarily impressed when I visited the Music for Youth 1998 schools prom, as many hon. Members would have been, by the quality of the music making. However, music has been under threat in our schools, which is why our policies are so important to ensuring the continuation of what is a great national tradition.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): In view of the alarming evidence produced last year by the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, which showed that the imposition of charges for tuition had already had a devastating effect on the presentation of pupils for music examinations, will the Government monitor closely the effect of their proposals on the level of participation to ensure that that extremely unhealthy trend is reversed?

Mr. Howarth: The findings of the Associated Board were both dismaying and important, and they form part of the background to the substantial increase in funding for schools music introduced by my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Culture, Media and Sport and

for Education and Employment. The Performing Rights Society is making a further study—a map—of provision of musical education and tuition throughout the country. We shall continue to do as the right hon. Gentleman recommends by monitoring the situation closely.

Tourism

4. **Mr. Robert Syms** (Poole): When he is proposing to publish his tourism strategy. [66761]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): We shall publish our new tourism strategy on Friday 26 February.

Mr. Syms: I thank the Minister. Tourism is very important to my constituents, and there is an award-winning tourist information centre on the quay in Poole that does an excellent job.

Must not a key point of any strategy be to measure the impact of other Departments of Government on tourism? Do not many small businesses—the backbone of the tourism industry in Dorset—face increased bureaucracy from both Europe and the Government?

Mr. Smith: The hon. Gentleman is right to point to the need to approach tourism not only from one Department, but across the whole of government, and that is precisely why we worked in close consultation with a wide range of Departments in drawing up our strategy. The small firms measures that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced in his pre-Budget statement a few months ago are a clear example of that.

Mr. Keith Vaz (Leicester, East): May I say how much I look forward to the publication of the statement on 26 February? Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State take this opportunity to recognise the importance of hotels and hoteliers to any tourism strategy? Will he confirm that that sector has been fully consulted in advance of his statement?

Mr. Smith: I can confirm that. We have consulted widely with some 200 people representing all parts of the industry, including hotels, catering and hospitality, to engage them in our development of the strategy. We have also been out to widespread public consultation, and the theme of the new document will be to work in partnership with all parts of the industry.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): Is it true that the strategy, which is long overdue, will be announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, not the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport? If the Secretary of State has indeed been sidelined, yet again, by the Chancellor, will he take an early opportunity to brief the Chancellor on deep concern in the tourism industry about the combined impacts of the national minimum wage, the working time directive, the parental leave directive, the part-time workers directive and other burdens on their business?

Mr. Smith: I shall launch the strategy—not my right hon. Friend the Chancellor; the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) is wrong, as always.

As regards such matters as the national minimum wage, the hon. Gentleman should talk to people in the tourism industry. They understand that if we are to make a success of tourism, we must have a good-quality product for the visitor. That means giving the people who work in the industry decent remuneration, good conditions, good training and good career opportunities. That is what the minimum wage is all about, and the good players in the tourism industry know it.

Regional Theatres

5. **Mrs. Caroline Spelman** (Meriden): If he will make a statement on the funding of regional theatres. [66762]

The Minister for Arts (Mr. Alan Howarth): The Arts Council of England and regional arts boards will between them spend more than £50 million of Government grant in aid in support of drama, including regional theatre, during 1999-2000, representing 27 per cent. of the Arts Council's total grant.

Mrs. Spelman: Does the Minister accept that relatively poor funding for regional arts companies, such as the Birmingham Royal Ballet, merely serves to aggravate the chronic financial position in which theatres find themselves?

Mr. Howarth: We recognise the significant problems affecting regional theatre, which have been documented by the National Campaign for the Arts in its publication "Theatre in Crisis: the plight of regional theatre". They are the consequence of several years of standstill funding earlier this decade, and we are starting to reverse the position. Regional arts boards will have grant in aid and lottery funding together increased by 44 per cent. next year.

Mr. Joe Ashton (Bassetlaw): Is the Minister aware that in the previous Parliament, the Select Committee on National Heritage, investigated the costing and funding of regional theatres and found that 40 per cent. of their income came from local authorities and Arts Council subsidies? We found that football got 50 per cent. of its income from sponsorship, selling shirts, television and commercial activities, compared with only 5 per cent. for regional theatre. There is a major gap. Should the Minister not tell the Arts Council that it must do more along those lines?

Mr. Howarth: I am not clear whether my hon. Friend is asking for more money from the Arts Council or from sponsorship or both. It is certainly a complex funding picture. Contributions from grant in aid and the lottery are needed as well as those from local authorities, business sponsorship and the box office. The exact mix will vary from theatre to theatre, but of course we want more business sponsorship, not only for the arts in general but for theatre in particular.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): The Minister knows that many regional theatres face severe financial deficits and even possible closure. With the Arts Council in the process of dissolving itself on Government orders, who or what will be responsible for taking a national view of the important role of regional theatres?

Mr. Howarth: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will take a national view, as will the Arts Council

and its drama panel. Our strategy is to delegate much more to the regions. We believe that that will lead to more appropriate responsiveness and accountability, and to a higher proportion of publicly derived money being available for distribution according to decisions taken in the regions.

Rugby Union

6. **Mr. Denis MacShane** (Rotherham): What representations he has received concerning the state of rugby union; and if he will make a statement on his responsibilities as they affect the sport. [66763]

The Minister for Sport (Mr. Tony Banks): I convey the House's congratulations to Ulster, who beat Colomiers in Dublin on Saturday to become the first Irish side to win the European cup. That united Ireland in a way that politicians can only dream about and was an object lesson to politicians about the enormous power of sport.

I share the concern of the House and the wider public about the recent problems that have bedevilled the five nations championship, although I have received few representations about it myself. I am in regular close contact with bodies such as the Rugby Football Union to convey Government concerns and offer help where I can but, as my hon. Friend knows, sport is not directly controlled by the Government. I met the RFU on 26 January to discuss a possible bid for the 2007 world cup. We also discussed this year's world cup, the five nations championship and the opportunities to bring major sporting events to this country.

Mr. MacShane: I thank the Minister for that full reply which shows that as well as impaling sports administrators, he is scrumming down and getting on with the job. Is he aware that the International Rugby Board is already charging £40 for ticket entries to the world rugby cup? That will lead to half-empty stadiums. It proposes to charge £100 for the final. Will he consider that and the proposal to reorganise the rugby union leagues? There are calls for a super-elite league based on teams close to the M25. That would mean a southern comfort closed shop of rugby union excluding many northern teams such as the great teams of Yorkshire, especially Rotherham, who are in the frame for promotion. Any league system for rugby should involve three up, three down to preserve movement and ambition. Rugby is actively supported in all our communities.

Mr. Banks: I have heard concerns about likely ticket pricing in the world cup. It is going to be an exciting world cup, but people will not be quite as interested in some matches as in others. We do not want a repeat of the problems in France during the soccer world cup. I will take these matters up. I have had some discussions with the RFU and I will take it up with the IRB because it would be shame to spoil a fantastic world cup.

As to the other matter, I am in favour of two conferences of the British league, but I understand that discussions are continuing. The latest idea seems to involve an Anglo-Welsh league, with the first division comprising mainly the 10 top English clubs and Cardiff and Swansea. That is a matter for the governing bodies and authorities of rugby to determine, but I know that they will listen carefully to what my hon. Friend has said and to the views of the all-party rugby group. Rugby has gone through a rough patch recently, and it would be a pity to lose this good opportunity to restructure the sport in this country.

Quality, Efficiency and Standards Team

7. **Mrs. Alice Mahon** (Halifax): What progress has been made on the setting up of Quest. [66764]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): Good progress is being made on the establishment of Quest. We have advertised for a director and intend to have the team operational at the start of the new financial year.

Mrs. Mahon: Does my right hon. Friend agree that an early priority of the new team should be the administration of sport in this country, with a view to offering some suggestions as to how it could be improved?

Mr. Smith: I agree with my hon. Friend. We have established two priority areas of work for Quest in the first year. First, we propose a review of the targets and indicators used within funding agreements across the fields that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport sponsors; and, secondly, a review of administrative structures within national bodies, including a review of the governing bodies of sport.

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk): Does the right hon. Gentleman recognise that Quest's establishment sits uncomfortably with his declared aim of devolving power? Does he understand the extent of concern about his constant and calculated undermining of the arm's-length principle—his idea of which is clearly on a par with that of Venus de Milo?

Mr. Smith: That was a somewhat laboured analogy, if I may say so. The hon. Gentleman completely misunderstands the nature of Quest—as always, Opposition Members are wrong. This is a small team that will ensure that the bureaucracies in place to fund sport, the arts, tourism, film and broadcasting work effectively and efficiently and that we get good value for the taxpayers' money. I would have thought that any sensible person—let alone those on the Opposition Benches—would recognise the value of that.

Museums and Galleries (North-West)

8. **Mr. Lindsay Hoyle** (Chorley): What plans he has for the allocation of additional funding which will be available to museums and galleries in *(a)* the north-west region and *(b)* Chorley over the next three years. [66766]

The Minister for Arts (Mr. Alan Howarth): The six designated museums in the north-west can apply to the new £15 million designated museums challenge fund. As well as free entry for children and pensioners at the national museums and galleries on Merseyside, funds are available to hold their annual eight-pass season ticket

at £3. The museum of science and industry in Manchester has also been allocated funds to enable free access for children from April this year.

Mr. Hoyle: I thank the Minister for that reply. However, is he aware that there are many other museums and galleries throughout the north-west, particularly Astley Hall in my constituency, which is a very good gallery and museum? What help and support can it expect from the Minister?

Mr. Howarth: Astley Hall in my hon. Friend's constituency, as a museum registered with the Museums and Galleries Commission, may apply to the £7 million heritage lottery fund's access fund and also to the new challenge fund established by my Department of £500,000 in each of the next two years for information technology and educational projects in museums.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Why will the Minister not apologise to the hon. Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) for breaking his pre-election pledge? Did not Labour say during the general election campaign that all people—not just children and pensioners—would have free access to all galleries and museums by 2001? Why is that another broken promise?

Mr. Howarth: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman is wrong. We are delivering on our pledge to provide funds for free entry to national museums and galleries. That funding will be available to enable free entry for children from 1 April this year and for pensioners the year after. In the year following that, we have allocated sufficient funding to enable free entry for all to national museums and galleries if the trustees wish to take up that opportunity.

Ms Beverley Hughes (Stretford and Urmston): May I take this opportunity to thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and hon. Members on both sides of the House who represent the north of England for their support for the imperial war museum for the north, which was given the go-ahead last week? The project will break new ground in accessibility, giving visitors and students access to previously unseen photographs and film footage and enabling them to see, for example, their great-grandfathers' great war record. However, does my hon. Friend the Minister share my concern that, so far, the heritage lottery fund has not contributed to that project; and is he confident that it gives sufficient priority to such prestigious projects in the regions?

Mr. Howarth: My hon. Friend herself deserves an accolade in respect of that exciting project, which she has supported imaginatively and energetically. The design and the project are both wonderful and I know that the heritage lottery fund is considering an application for further support for the project.

Tourism

9. **Dr. Ian Gibson** (Norwich, North): How he has helped regional tourist boards to develop and promote tourism in their areas. [66768]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): Regional tourist boards receive Government funding through the English tourist board. As I announced in December, more resources will be used for the support of tourism in the regions. The regional tourist boards will continue to work with the British Tourist Authority on the promotion of their region overseas; and with their local authorities and commercial members on developing and promoting tourism in their area.

Dr. Gibson: Does my hon. Friend remember the document "Breaking New Ground: a Strategy for Tourism and Hospitality", in which local councils were exhorted to put forward strategies on tourism and leisure activities? How does she envisage local councils doing that, given that some local councils, such as Norwich, have received poor settlements?

Janet Anderson: I understand how committed my hon. Friend is to the future of tourism, which is extremely important to the economic development of his area. We are pleased that the East of England tourist board has managed a significant increase in its allocation for 1998–99. The strategy that we are to publish on 26 February will take into account the need for close liaison and collaboration with local authorities and regional tourist boards. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has made it plain that we are doing all we can to get more funding for tourism into the regions.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): Given the importance to the capital city of tourism, as measured in economic and employment terms, will the Minister tell us what role the Greater London assembly will have in promoting tourism? If, as I suspect, the assembly is to have a small role, or none at all, will she have a word with her two ministerial colleagues who represent London constituencies? If the London tourist board is to look after tourism in London, what is the use of having a Greater London assembly?

Janet Anderson: The hon. Gentleman is quite wrong: it is our intention that the Greater London assembly and the mayor will have a real responsibility for tourism in London, which is important as the gateway to the rest of the country.

Museums and Galleries (Educational Work)

10. **Ms Christine Russell** (City of Chester): What plans he has to encourage museums and galleries to extend their educational work in the community. [66769]

The Minister for Arts (Mr. Alan Howarth): The Government attach high priority to the education work of museums and galleries, as is shown in new allocations of funding both from my Department and from the Department for Education and Employment. I congratulate the Grosvenor museum in my hon. Friend's constituency on the excellent education work it carries out, using its collections, on Roman archaeology and local history.

Ms Russell: Will my hon. Friend join me in further congratulating the Grosvenor museum on recently being awarded a substantial grant from the heritage lottery fund

to make the building and its facilities accessible to people with disabilities? The museum already runs a good programme of educational work in the community; will my hon. Friend confirm that it will be possible to use the challenge fund, which he mentioned earlier, for work on an oral history programme, which the museum wants to carry out? Such a programme will not only engage older people, but, as important, give a sense of community to younger people.

Mr. Howarth: I am happy to reiterate, as my hon. Friend invites me to, my congratulations to the Grosvenor museum. The project that she mentioned should be eligible for funding under the programme. I emphasise her point about the importance of museums attending to their role in dealing with social exclusion. My hon. Friend mentioned disabled people, but there are many opportunities to help people throughout their lives. Museums will be eligible to apply for funding under the new initiative on community access to lifelong learning, which will be funded by the new opportunities fund.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South-West Surrey): It is good to hear so much encouragement for Labour Members and their projects, but what has the Minister to say to my constituents about places such as Haslemere museum? That is an excellent museum with splendid collections, but it has been informed that such has been the reduction in lottery money going to the heritage lottery fund that it is not now possible to support projects that might otherwise have received help. The Minister may have provided a modest increase from his Department's funds, but that is dwarfed by the raiding of lottery funds for museum projects to give money back to the Chancellor for his pet projects.

Mr. Howarth: The heritage lottery fund will have more than the £1.8 billion promised by the right hon. Lady when she was Secretary of State and will receive no less than she and the previous Administration intended. I hope that she will return to her constituency and offer a little comfort and cheer to those in Haslemere.

MILLENNIUM EXPERIENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Dome (Access)

29. **Mr. Damian Green** (Ashford): If he will make a statement on plans for promoting access to the dome. [66788]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): The millennium experience at the dome aims to be largely car-free and to offer comprehensive and effective public transport access. Over 95 per cent. of the expected 12 million visitors will arrive by public transport. The New Millennium Experience Company will ensure, through its marketing strategy and information provided with dome tickets, that visitors are fully aware of the most convenient public access modes and routes.

Mr. Green: For many of those visitors, the most convenient access mode will be the Jubilee line extension, if that is built in time. If it is not, what contingency plans does the Minister have to convey visitors to the dome? Will we all have to be strong swimmers?

Janet Anderson: Whatever is necessary to ensure that people can get to the dome will be done. The Government are confident that everything necessary is being done by London Transport and Bechtel to ensure that the line opens later this year in time for the millennium dome celebrations.

Mr. John Austin (Erith and Thamesmead): Does the Minister share my view that one of the lasting beneficial legacies of the dome will be the improvements in public transport to an area of south-east London which has probably lost more jobs than any other part of the United Kingdom? Does she share my concern that access by river will be almost exclusively from the west of the dome? Will she meet her colleagues in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to consider the development of ferry services to the east of the dome, to Erith, Thamesmead and beyond?

Janet Anderson: As my hon. Friend will know, we expect 1 million people to travel by boat from central London to the dome, using new river services. I recognise his concern and, as he knows, I have agreed to meet him soon to discuss that.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Freeze the river.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): The hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) is on to an interesting point, and I would be grateful if the Minister could comment on the intriguing article in *The Guardian* today which suggests that the Thames will be frozen to enable royal access to the dome. Does that not take the idea of cool Britain a little too far?

Janet Anderson: That was one of the hon. Gentleman's better jokes, but they are not terribly good and I hope that they will improve. That article is pure speculation and I assure the hon. Gentleman that there are no plans to freeze the Thames.

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): Will the Minister do what she can to encourage people to access the dome by bicycle? For example, she could point out that most rail companies operating in and out of London will carry bicycles. Will she also ensure that the London cycle network along the banks of the Thames is ready in time and that there is adequate cycle parking at the dome for people who want to bike there?

Janet Anderson: As my hon. Friend knows, we take that seriously and we want to enable as many people as possible to travel to the dome by bicycle. As he also knows, the new riverside cycle/walk link to historic Greenwich, and improvements to existing cycleways in the area, will help. We shall make sure that there are secure facilities at the dome where people can leave bikes and motorbikes.

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): May I return the Minister to the question asked by the hon. Member for Ashford (Mr. Green)? Does she accept that the head of

London Underground, no less, has suggested that the Jubilee line may not be completed on time? What does she think is the percentage chance that the line will be open on time? If it is not open on time, how will people get to the dome? There is a dependence on the Jubilee line, which cannot be met by other means. Will there not be a catastrophe if the line is not open on time?

Janet Anderson: The hon. Gentleman may not know that following that report in *The Independent on Sunday*, my right hon. Friend the Minister of Transport stated that Mr. Smith had been misrepresented by that newspaper. He went on to say that nothing in this life is absolutely guaranteed, but I repeat to the hon. Gentleman what I said earlier: the Government are confident that everything necessary is being done by London Transport and Bechtel to ensure that the line opens later this year and in time for the millennium dome celebrations.

Dome (Future)

30. **Mr. Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham): If he will make a statement on the future use of the millennium dome after the millennium celebrations. [66789]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): The Government are concerned to ensure that the nation enjoys a long-term and enduring legacy from the millennium celebrations as a whole, and that includes the dome. That was one of the conditions set by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in June 1997 when the Government gave the go-ahead for the project. We plan in the near future to make announcements about the invitation of expressions of interest in future use.

Mr. Loughton: The Secretary of State will be aware that opinion polls still show that the majority of adults are highly sceptical about the dome and think that it is a waste of money. Such scepticism was compounded by his predecessor's reluctance to release full details and information about the dome, which led to a stream of rumours and unhelpful speculation. Will the Secretary of State undertake to make a break with the cloak-and-dagger approach of his predecessor, and give a full and open outline of his plans for the dome, once the millennium celebrations are behind us and the banners for the latest re-relaunch of new Labour have been put away?

Mr. Smith: I will be, as I have always been, open and transparent about everything that is happening. As I said, invitations to bidders for future use of the dome will be announced shortly. Public support for the dome is increasing, particularly among children, who very much want to go and visit it. The level of support that the dome is enjoying far exceeds any level of support that the Tory party is currently enjoying.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the Conservatives planned to dismantle the dome after the millennium celebrations, and that they have advanced no positive ideas for its future? In the eyes of some, such a lack of imagination and vision might warrant a shake-up on their Front Bench. By contrast, will my right hon. Friend ensure that there is the fullest public consultation about the future of what will be an extremely attractive site?

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend has the Tories bang to rights. Under the previous Government, the intention was to dismantle the entire dome after one year. We have made sure that the structural steelwork has a lifespan of at least 60 years. The roofing material is expected to last at least 25 years before major maintenance is necessary. We want the dome to stay. We want it to be put to the best possible use, to the benefit of London and the country as a whole.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): May I take that last remark from the Secretary of State as an assurance that the millennium dome will remain open after the millennium celebrations, so that those of us from the north of England and Scotland who wish to visit it will be able to do so, given that there will clearly be no access by public transport, and we will have to come by foot or bicycle to reach it?

Mr. Smith: That is complete nonsense. The hon. Lady should have listened to the answers that have already been given. I am sure that she and her constituents will be extremely welcome to come to the dome by public transport during the year 2000.

Dome (Contents)

31. **Mr. Harry Cohen** (Leyton and Wanstead): Who is deciding what art will be displayed at the millennium dome; and if he will make a statement. [66790]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): The New Millennium Experience Company is responsible for all aspects of the content and operation of the millennium experience. The company is considering options for a sculpture park outside the dome. There are no plans to display works of art inside the dome; however, some of the country's best creative design and artistic talent is engaged in ensuring that the development of individual zones reflects the project's innovative nature.

Mr. Cohen: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer, but when will decisions be made about the art to be in the dome? Will there be a public discussion about it? Will my hon. Friend lean on the national galleries to release some of their best work for the dome? Will the Government commission some art from the new generation of artists? Will there be a variety of art to reflect the millennium, but also some modern art to reflect the fact that the dome itself is an example of neurotic realism?

Janet Anderson: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. He referred specifically to the national gallery. I remind him that, thanks to action taken by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, everyone now has free access to the national gallery. We are always willing to consider ideas, but there are no plans at present to display works of art inside the dome. There will be 14 zones of exceptionally high quality, which will breathe real life into the core theme, which is "time to make a difference".

All the zones will show the ingenuity, imagination and talent of young British designers, of which we are very proud.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

The President of the Council was asked—

Car Parking Charges

38. **Mr. Norman Baker** (Lewes): What representations she has received regarding car parking charges for hon. Members. [66799]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): No formal representations have been made.

Mr. Baker: Does the Minister agree that it is rather odd that parking across the road at Abingdon green costs some £20 for 12 hours whereas it is free for Members of Parliament? Does he support proposals in the transport White Paper for the introduction of workplace charging? Does he agree that they should apply to the House of Commons, notwithstanding opposition from Labour Members? Does he further agree that hon. Members should not be allowed to claim the charges back under the office costs allowance?

Mr. Tipping: The hon. Gentleman should remember that the Greater London Authority Bill was introduced by the Labour party. It gives the mayor of London or the boroughs the opportunity to charge at a future date—the year 2000? The House will look carefully at the response from the new mayor—the new Labour mayor—and we shall respond accordingly once that advice has been given.

Recesses (Parliamentary Activity)

39. **Mr. Harry Barnes** (North-East Derbyshire): If she will assess the consequences of allowing written questions to be answered and early-day motions tabled and published during parliamentary adjournments; and if she will make a statement. [66800]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): The Government have not yet been persuaded that there is a case for separating those parliamentary activities from the times when the House normally sits, but would be prepared to give it further consideration.

Mr. Barnes: May I try to persuade the Government to act as suggested in my question? We have a number of recesses, including a lengthy one in the summer, and the only means that Members of Parliament have to contact Departments during that period is by telephone, fax or letter. Occasionally, they manage to take a deputation to see a Minister. It is important that we have parliamentary questions answered and early-day motions published if we are to raise important issues on behalf of our constituents. Why is it that, during the 13 weeks of the summer recess, we are no longer Members of Parliament, but Members without a Parliament? Do we not need some of the avenues that a Parliament should have?

Hon. Members: Agree.

Mr. Tipping: I shall agree with this: my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) is not noted for his quietness during the summer recess. He campaigns vigorously, as do many other hon. Members. Avenues are available if hon. Members wish to pursue certain issues, but as I said in my opening remarks, if a strong case can be made, we are prepared to look again and consult others on a way forward.

Mr. Fabricant: Is not one of the Minister's fears that other Ministers may not be available to answer such parliamentary questions? Is he aware that technology now exists to contact helicopters, Concorde and luxury villas in the Seychelles, so that Ministers can be available at all times to answer hon. Members' questions?

Mr. Tipping: The hon. Gentleman well knows that each Department has Ministers working throughout the year, every day and every week. We intend to modernise this country; we shall modernise it throughout the long break and way through into the millennium.

Millennium Compliance

40. **Mr. Lawrie Quinn** (Scarborough and Whitby): If she will make a statement on the state of readiness of the national infrastructure for coping with the millennium bug. [66801]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): It was under this Government that the major utility providers and users were brought together for the first time at the national infrastructure forum, which is being led by Action 2000.

The results of the first round of independent assessments for five key sectors—electricity, oil and gas fuel, telecoms, water and finance—were announced at their meeting on 21 January by the regulators responsible. The results were encouraging, and the regulators confirmed that each of the sectors appear to be well on the way to being fully prepared.

Mr. Quinn: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Will she join me in condemning certain sectors of the press and certain Opposition Members who are trying to pursue alarmist propaganda about what will happen at the end of this year? What can all Members of the House do to promote the good work that is being done, and the good start that has been made, to make sure that our infrastructure is ready to face the challenges of the millennium period?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is entirely right to say that, although it would not be correct to be complacent, a great deal of very good work is being done. I urge hon. Members on both sides of the House to make sure that

their constituents are aware of that, lest they fall into the trap of believing some of the more exaggerated stories that appear.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Is the right hon. Lady aware, as I have been made aware by railway and air transport companies, that not one insurance company is prepared to cover travel on 1 January 2000? I believe that that is also the case with ferries. That is not a move to create hysteria, but simply a practical problem. For example, people wishing to travel back to their place of work on 1 January 2000 will not be able to do so, because there is simply no insurance policy in this country that will be issued to cover travel on that date.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Lady makes an important point. The issue of what is happening—for example, in transport—is being examined carefully by the relevant authorities, and in particular by the international authorities in each of these sectors. I am sure that they will keep that matter under review.

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): As my right hon. Friend knows, I am one of the sadder Members of this House—I have been to the Library to read the 500 pages on the millennium that are deposited there every quarter.

May I reflect what has already been said? In America, the Government have put together a league table, grading Departments from A to E to show where they are on the millennium bug. Will she do that, not only for Departments, but for the utilities? In the first review, which was held last year, the transport sector in America did not achieve A, B, C, D or E; it got an F. Every chip in every traffic light is affected by the millennium bug, which shows how deep the problem runs. It would be great if a league table were put into the public domain, so we could check on how good things are.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important and valid point. I am slightly shocked to hear that he does not think that every Member of the House has read the whole of that document; but his suggestion is interesting and the Government keep constantly under review the best way of getting across information about the matter.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): First, may I thank the right hon. Lady for not blaming everything on the previous incarnation? Obviously that would be an unfashionable thing to do at the moment. Can she confirm or deny reports broadcast yesterday that all leave for the armed forces is to be cancelled, as a precautionary measure, during the new year period? Is that true or false?

Mrs. Beckett: I am afraid that I am not aware at the moment of whether that is true or false, but I am well aware that, in many sectors, leave is being cancelled or people are being urgently advised that it would be preferable if they did not take leave because people need other people to work.

European National Parliaments (Contact)

41. **Mr. Denis MacShane** (Rotherham): What plans she has to improve contact between hon. Members and Members of European national parliaments. [66802]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): My right hon. Friend the President of the Council said that the scheme to allow Members to visit European Union institutions would be extended. I can announce today that, from the next financial year, Members will be able to claim reimbursement of travel and subsistence expenses for one visit either to the main EU institutions or to the national Parliament of any EU member state. The scheme will be reviewed after a year to see whether it is possible to allow two visits in the second year.

Mr. MacShane: In welcoming the Minister to his job, may I congratulate him on his appointment and on his excellent answer? The aim of this proposal is to extend our relationship as national parliamentarians with other national Parliaments of Europe. We should move away from the obsession with Brussels and Strasbourg and make connections with national Parliaments, national Governments and national political parties in Paris, Copenhagen, Madrid or wherever it is judged necessary.

Will my hon. Friend keep this matter permanently under review? I am sure that it will be a success, because it will increase the ability of MPs of all parties to represent their constituents' interests in other cities across the European Union.

Mr. Tipping: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind comments. I am sure that he will continue to pursue this matter, as he has done in recent years. He has a strong voice in Rotherham, which he is keen to extend across Europe. It is important for Members to visit institutions and to talk to colleagues abroad.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): If one accepted the validity of the comments of the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), would the Minister seriously consider extending this facility to visits by British parliamentarians to the United States Congress, given that our relationship with the United States is closer, better, more natural, deeper and longer than it will ever be with the foreigners on the continent?

Mr. Tipping: The right hon. Gentleman and his friends have recently been critical of trips to the United States, so we shall not listen to his current suggestion.

English Regions

42. **Mr. Ian Stewart** (Eccles): What progress has been made in ensuring that issues of concern in the English regions are being addressed in Parliament. [66803]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): I announced on 14 January that a proposal would be put to the Modernisation Committee to revive and adapt the Standing Committee on Regional Affairs. A memorandum setting out the proposal will shortly be sent to the Committee, which I hope will report on it in the near future.

Mr. Stewart: I thank my right hon. Friend for her answer. When will the Standing Committee meet and how many MPs will be involved? Does the right hon. Lady welcome the introduction of the regional development agencies as a first step towards regional government in the regions of England?

Mrs. Beckett: I hope that the Modernisation Committee will recommend, and that the House will agree, a change in the Standing Orders so that the Committee can be convened later this Session. As to how many Members would serve on it, that is a detail which the Modernisation Committee will have to consider. I share my hon. Friend's view that the regional development agencies are admirable in their own right, and I am conscious of the fact that some people want them to develop.

Private Members' Bills

43. **Sir Sydney Chapman** (Chipping Barnet): What assessment she has made of the operation of the procedures for private Members' Bills. [66805]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): Concern has been expressed about the systematic blocking of well supported measures by a few Members. If the procedures are found to be unsatisfactory this Session, then either the Modernisation or the Procedure Committee could examine the matter.

Sir Sydney Chapman: I am interested to hear the Minister's reply. Whatever the merits or demerits of a particular private Member's Bill, the fact that few such Bills reach the statute book breeds disillusionment among the public about our procedures. Will he consider carefully the suggestion that fewer should be chosen in the ballot, but they should be given more time—without increasing the time available for private Members' Bills in the calendar year?

Mr. Tipping: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to point out that fewer private Members' Bills gained assent in the last parliamentary Session. We want to consider what happens in the current Session before we make a judgment. The hon. Gentleman clearly understands the wider issue, which is to achieve a balance between the time required for debates and statements and the need to hear all the views in the House. I am not convinced that pledges can be given to make extra time available.

Modernisation

44. **Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough): If she will make a statement on Government proposals for further modernisation of the House of Commons. [66806]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): We are in the early weeks of the experiment approved by the House on 16 December for earlier sittings on Thursdays. The Modernisation Committee is looking at the possibility of creating a second forum, or Main Committee. I will shortly invite it to study ways in which the Standing Committee on Regional Affairs might be revived and updated.

Fiona Mactaggart: I thank my right hon. Friend for her reply. She referred to the proposal for the establishment of a Main Committee. Could that perhaps provide an opportunity for our procedures to be made more transparent and slightly less like a bunfight? My constituents find watching the Chamber a depressing experience at times: they gain the impression that Members jeer and shout, and do not listen to each other. Does my right hon. Friend not agree that the establishment of a Main Committee might help the Chamber to grow up?

Mrs. Beckett: That would be a dangerous proposition. The Modernisation Committee, however, is currently taking evidence from a number of quarters on the proposal for a Main Committee, and believes that such a Committee might indeed lead to greater transparency—and, perhaps, to some variation in the way in which we debate some of the issues that come before us.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South-West Surrey): Does the right hon. Lady realise that, having fought so hard to achieve universal suffrage and their place in the House of Commons, women will judge her harshly if, under the pretence of family-friendly policies, she uses them as an excuse to dumb down the House and reduce the number of hours in which Members of Parliament can argue their case?

Mrs. Beckett: I can only say that, in listening to what was said about the proposed changes and the experiment that is being undertaken in the House, the right hon. Lady has clearly failed to take into account the fact that there has been no diminution of the hours in which the House sits and no dumbing down; nor would any be proposed by this Government.

Kosovo

3.32 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): With permission, I should like to make a statement about recent developments in regard to Kosovo.

The situation on the ground remains tense. On Friday, more than 20 Kosovo Albanians were shot in Rugovo. On Saturday, a hand grenade was lobbed into a cafe in Pristina frequented by Serbs, injuring eight people, including one Albanian. Yesterday, two Serb policemen were injured when a grenade was fired into their van while they were returning from the funeral of a casualty of earlier conflict. More than 200 people have been killed since the Holbrooke agreement last October provided for a ceasefire.

At its meeting in London last Friday, the Contact Group called on both sides to end hostilities now. It insisted on full compliance by Belgrade with its undertakings of last October, and on real co-operation with both the verification mission and the International War Crimes Tribunal.

The main focus of the meeting was on the urgent need to put momentum into the political process. Since last October, Ambassadors Hill and Petritsch have developed the Contact Group's framework document for a political settlement, which reflects extensive consultation with both sides. The detailed document provides for an interim accord for three years. That period would provide an opportunity for the creation of democratic self-government in Kosovo, through free and fair elections supervised by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. The new institutions of Kosovo would enjoy a wide range of self-government, including control of Kosovo's own police and internal security. The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia would retain competence only for foreign policy, external defence, monetary policy, the single market, customs and federal taxation. Both Serb and Albanian communities would be fully protected, with the right to elected institutions preserving their national cultures, language and education. The framework document also provides that, at the end of three years, the future status of Kosovo would be reviewed under international auspices.

Despite the extensive consultation and the detailed work that has gone into the framework document by representatives of the Contact Group, in three months there has not been one negotiating meeting on it between Belgrade and the Kosovo Albanians. On Friday, the Contact Group resolved on a programme of action to break that stalemate.

We agreed to summon both sides to negotiations on the basis of the framework document. We set a tight timetable that requires both sides to attend talks by this Saturday and to conclude negotiations within less than two further weeks. France has offered to provide a venue for the talks, which will take place under the joint chairmanship of me and Hubert Védrine, the French Foreign Minister. Also on Friday, the United Nations Security Council welcomed the Contact Group's strategy and demanded that both parties should comply with it.

On Saturday, the North Atlantic Council gave its full support to the Contact Group's strategy and warned that

"NATO is ready to take whatever measures are necessary"

to avert the humanitarian catastrophe by compelling compliance with the demands of the international community. In the meantime, the North Atlantic Council delegated to its Secretary-General, Javier Solana, authority to order military action in the light of the responses of both parties.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister discussed Kosovo with President Chirac during his visit last Thursday. They agreed that both Britain and France would be willing to consider the deployment, with their allies, of ground troops in Kosovo to provide a period of stability and peace during which a political settlement could take root.

I was instructed by the Contact Group to convey our demands to both parties and, on Saturday, I visited Belgrade and Skopje. I was accompanied throughout by Bill Walker, chief of the verification mission. The visit increased my respect for its valuable work. It has provided instant and reliable information on atrocities, which invariably occur in places where it is absent, and has undoubtedly deterred further atrocities where it is present.

In Belgrade, I met jointly with President Milosevic of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and President Milutinovic of the Republic of Serbia. I stressed to them that I came with the mandate of the united Contact Group, and backed by the authority of the North Atlantic Council. Our requirement on them to take part in negotiations under international chairmanship is the best opportunity that Belgrade will get to extricate itself from a conflict that it cannot win. President Milosevic undertook to study the Contact Group proposals and to reply within a few days.

In Skopje, I met Dr. Rugova, Mr. Demaqi and Mr. Qosja, who between them represent a broad spectrum of Kosovar opinion. I stressed in all my conversations with the Kosovo Albanians that the proposals of the Contact Group offered a democratic, self-governing Kosovo free from the bloodshed of recent months.

Dr. Rugova, who was elected overwhelmingly last year as leader of the Kosovo Albanians, welcomed the opportunity for talks and committed his party to participate fully in them. I also spoke by telephone to Mr. Surroi, an independent publisher and a leading political figure in Pristina, who gave his full support to the proposals and expressed his willingness to participate. Mr. Demaqi, who acts as political spokesman for the Kosovo Liberation Army, and Mr. Qosja, leader of the third largest Kosovo Albanian party, both undertook to consult their colleagues and to let me have their responses within days.

I cannot confirm that the talks that we seek will take place. Nor can I guarantee that, if they take place, they will succeed. Serious issues of difference remain between the two sides, which it will take hard negotiation to resolve, such as the nature of the review to take place in three years' time and the relationship between a self-governing Kosovo and Serbia, but I can confirm that the meeting of the Contact Group showed real unity and a common determination to provide for progress towards a political settlement of the conflict.

It is now for both parties to show the same commitment to finding a political solution. Neither of them can win the conflict by military means. Both of them would benefit from a political settlement. The offer of those talks, brokered by the Contact Group and backed by the

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Security Council and NATO, provides the best opportunity that they will ever get to achieve a political settlement through dialogue. I urge both of them now to seize that opportunity and to give the people of Kosovo hope for their future in place of fear of the present bloodshed.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement.

It has been clear for some considerable time that a clear ultimatum is required to halt the violence in Kosovo and to bring the two sides to the negotiating table. As the Foreign Secretary said on Friday, the international community cannot simply allow the current stalemate to continue while the ceasefire crumbles and people continue to be killed. In truth, the ceasefire crumbled some time ago; the October agreement is in tatters; and, as the Foreign Secretary has just said, more than 200 people have been killed since that agreement was entered into.

In the light of those dire facts, the Opposition fully support the summonsing of both sides to talks, by 6 February, and the setting of a clear deadline for conclusion of the negotiations. We also support the decision by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation to authorise the possible use of force, provided that it is based on clearly defined objectives.

NATO forces are reported to be on 48 hours' notice. Will the Foreign Secretary say more about British preparations for the possible use of force? Should military strikes be authorised, what plans exist for extraction of the OSCE verifiers—I join the Foreign Secretary in paying tribute to them, and to what they are doing in Kosovo—before any such action?

The Foreign Secretary also mentioned the possible deployment of ground troops to enforce any settlement. Would all leading NATO nations take part in such a deployment? Is the United States, in particular, now showing greater willingness to deploy such troops?

The whole House will wish to condemn unreservedly the killings that continue to take place in Kosovo. The Foreign Secretary referred to the discovery, on Friday, of the bodies of 24 Kosovo Albanians in the village of Rugovo. Will he tell the House what progress has been made by the verifiers and others in investigating who was responsible for those deaths? Does he accept a role for international war crimes investigators in that work, as he did after the massacre of 49 Kosovo Albanians at Racak?

The head of the OSCE has reaffirmed his belief that he has "absolutely no doubt" that Serbs were behind the Racak outrage. What discussions did the Foreign Secretary have with President Milosevic on access for war crimes investigators to that area? What response did he receive? Will he comment on weekend reports that United States surveillance teams uncovered evidence of direct involvement by senior Serb politicians and military representatives, both in the massacre itself and in the attempted cover-up that followed? Will he comment also on claims by United Nations human rights monitors that Serbian authorities have launched a new campaign of arresting and torturing Albanian political activists?

Does the Foreign Secretary recall that it is now almost eight months since he issued what he called a last warning to the Yugoslav President? Threats have been made repeatedly since, but they were not followed through. The response of the international community, led—as he constantly reminded us—by him, was described by the Prime Minister's press secretary as "dithering and disunited". Will the Foreign Secretary now give an assurance that those days are over and that, if the current ultimatum does not succeed, resolute action will be taken?

Mr. Cook: I shall respond to the right hon. and learned Gentleman's concluding remarks before I sit down, but, meanwhile, I shall respond to his questions.

Britain will take full part in any action that is taken by NATO. For that reason, we have already made appropriate arrangements for our airplanes to be ready in Italy.

If military action were in contemplation, the verification mission would of course have to be withdrawn. While I was in Skopje, I had the opportunity of meeting some of those who are deployed to the extraction force, which would assist in that task if it were necessary. Of course, the requirement to remove that verification mission, which is doing valuable work in Kosovo, must also be a factor in our decision on whether to take military action.

There is discussion in the United States Administration on ground troops. No conclusion has been reached, but there is growing recognition among many NATO members that a political settlement would have a better chance of success if it were backed by ground troops.

I have presented President Milosevic with the full conclusions of the Contact Group, which include the demand that the International War Crimes Tribunal be given access to Racak to carry out an investigation. I am well aware of the reports of what happened at Racak. I made my position on that plain when I spoke in the House two weeks ago. It is clear that the prime responsibility appears to lie with the Serb security forces, who were in the vicinity.

On Friday, the Contact Group of the United States, Russia and the major European nations was united without reservation behind the strategy that I have outlined to the House. Since then, the strategy has been backed without reservation by the 15 members of the Security Council and the 16 members of NATO. I regret that the right hon. and learned Gentleman could not give the same full support without indulging in party politics.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman talks about a period of eight months. I remind him that President Milosevic suspended the autonomy of Kosovo in 1990. Today's storm has been gathering in the eight years since then. For seven of those years, the right hon. and learned Gentleman's party was in power. Having done nothing throughout those long years to avert the crisis, it is a bit rich to complain that we have not solved the mess that we inherited from the Conservatives in eight months.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): With the exception of the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), there must surely be admiration and congratulation from all parties for the leading role that my right hon. Friend has played in the flurry of international conferences and initiatives in recent days. Although there are clearly loopholes and problems, including the extent to which we can rely on the promises of President Milosevic and uncertainty about who can speak properly on behalf of the Kosovo Liberation Army,

surely we must all recognise that the initiative is the only serious way out of the crisis. Those who reject it will bring a heavy burden on those whom they purport to represent—a burden that will be borne through greater bloodshed and destruction of property.

Mr. Cook: I entirely agree that the situation is very complex, and the best way to resolve those complications is for both sides to get around the table and thrash the issues out together. I am sad to endorse my hon. Friend's last remark, having had first-hand contact. I sometimes feel that the deaths on both sides are not necessarily the prime consideration of those involved with whom I discuss the matter. Undoubtedly the best prospect of peace and stability for the people of Kosovo lies in the process. I urge their leaders to take that step. The best way to halt casualties on the Serb side and to protect the rights of the Serb community in Kosovo also lies in the process.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his statement. Does he accept that the proposed talks at Rambouillet will be widely welcomed, providing a renewed momentum to the political process, firm proposals for discussion and a clear political objective should force be required—the three prerequisites that the Liberal Democrats have long advocated? I welcome his personal contribution to an overdue process still fraught with military and political risks.

I should like three assurances. First, will every effort be maintained to ensure common purpose with our European partners, particularly France and Germany? Secondly, if Dr. Rugova and President Milosevic are prepared to come to the table, will it be made clear to Dr. Demaqi and the KLA that they have no veto to prevent effective talks from proceeding? Lastly, will the Foreign Secretary confirm that the jurisdiction of the International War Crimes Tribunal and the eventual indictment of individuals in Kosovo guilty of crimes against humanity are not negotiable?

Mr. Cook: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his welcome for the initiative. On his first point, we will work hard to maintain the common purpose with our European allies, and as the event is jointly chaired by me and by the Foreign Minister of France, that is essential to the success of the enterprise. Germany will be represented throughout at Rambouillet at a high official level, and it is important that the President of the EU remains engaged in the process.

Secondly, there can be no veto by any specific party on whether the talks take place. We would be willing to conduct talks in the event of Dr. Rugova, Mr. Surroi and Mr. Qosja attending Rambouillet. However, we are anxious to make sure that we receive an Albanian team that is as representative as possible, and therefore we very much hope that Mr. Demaqi and the KLA will give us a positive answer. It is in the KLA's interests to be represented in the discussions.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman is of course correct to say that the demand for access for the International War Crimes Tribunal to Kosovo has been made by the UN Security Council and is in no way open to negotiation at Rambouillet.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): The assumption that many people are making is that NATO action would be against Serbian military assets. However, if this is an argument—as has been said at the Dispatch Box before—between Greater Serbia and, to some extent, Greater Albania, are there not circumstances in which NATO military action might have to be taken against forces other than those of Serbia?

Mr. Cook: If that assumption exists, it has no validity in terms of the text approved by the North Atlantic Council on Saturday, which is even-handed and has authorised Javier Solana to take action, depending on the response of both parties—not just one party. At the same time, we must be realistic. Military action in Kosovo against the KLA is not a readily feasible military option because there is no concentration of targets, and they are mostly among civilian areas that we would not wish to target. However, I hope that those questions will not arise. Quite apart from any prospect of military action, it is plainly in the interests of both sides to come together and make a success of the talks. I hope that they will draw that conclusion themselves.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): In the somewhat dire eventuality of Britain having to inject a military force on the ground, will the Foreign Secretary explain on whose side that force would be and its precise objectives? Would the force be interposed between two belligerents in what could prove to be an extremely long and costly engagement in an area ideally suited for guerrilla warfare? Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that self-determination for Kosovo, sooner rather than later, may prove to be the most realistic political option?

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman has raised the prospect of self-determination for an independent Kosovo several times; therefore, I find it surprising that he should warn that those who argue for that in Kosovo would choose to shoot at troops who were there to police a political settlement. There can be no question of any external force being interposed, because there is no such thing as a front line in Kosovo in which it could be interposed. The objective of any such deployment would not be in support of either side, but would be in support of a political settlement. Such a deployment would be realistically likely only if both sides were committed to that political settlement.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): In view of the remarks of the shadow Foreign Secretary, is my right hon. Friend aware that those of us who were in previous Parliaments remember only too well how the then Conservative Foreign Secretary, now Lord Hurd, treated with derision those of us who called for action to protect the lives of Muslims in Bosnia, and we are not likely to forget it? Does my right hon. Friend accept that all the evidence that has come to light in the past few days demonstrates that the mass murders have been orchestrated by Belgrade, and it would be naive to think otherwise? I hope that the plan that my right hon. Friend has announced today will succeed, but we should remember that, like Baghdad, unfortunately Belgrade understands only force.

Mr. Cook: If my hon. Friend is right on that last point, there is a clear possibility of that force being applied if

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Belgrade does not respond to the diplomatic invitation that we have made. I share my hon. Friend's concern about the atrocities and I also understand the point that he makes about the tight discipline and communications in the Serb security forces. I stress to the House that the important issue, and the strategic objective, must be to find a political settlement. As long as there is no political process regarding Kosovo, the ceasefire will continue to crumble. We will persuade both sides to look for a solution other than through conflict only if we can show that there is another way to achieve a much better solution.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): Does the Foreign Secretary accept that many in this country welcome the move that he has made and wish to encourage the settlement along the lines that he has suggested? However, in the light of his rather cautious remarks about the other members of the European Union, will he indicate the extent of differences between the member states? He was careful not to mention the extent of unanimity between the member states.

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his support for what we are doing. We discussed the issue at the European Union meeting of Foreign Ministers only a week ago today, and there was total unanimity in condemning the atrocities and stressing the importance of the political process. Four of the largest members of the European Union were present at the Contact Group on Friday—Britain, France, Germany and Italy—and all fully supported the conclusions that I have presented to the House. At present, I am not aware of any substantial disagreement in the European Union and I am sure that, should NATO decide that ground troops are an appropriate way to ensure that the political settlement can take root, many other members of the European Union will participate as members of NATO.

Mr. Robert N. Wareing (Liverpool, West Derby): As one who, as long as 14 years ago, argued while in Yugoslavia that Kosovo should get full republic status, I congratulate my right hon. Friend and his colleagues in the Contact Group on coming up with a framework document that is a basis for negotiation. I agree with him that military activity will never solve the problem. Has he taken cognisance of the words of Colonel Edward Cowan, our former military attaché in Belgrade, on BBC Radio 5 on 22 January that military action would be a disaster? I ask my right hon. Friend to consider the possible consequences of re-igniting the conflict in Bosnia if Serbia is bombed.

Mr. Cook: There is no one in the Contact Group or in NATO who actively wants to initiate military action. Any such decision would be taken with great reluctance and only if Belgrade refused to respond to the fair offer that we have made. I hope that Belgrade will recognise that it is in its interests to give a positive response and to share the view expressed by my hon. Friend that the way forward is to negotiate on the remaining difficult areas. Equally, Belgrade should have no doubt about our resolve if it refuses to end the conflict and fails to take this opportunity to engage in a political process. We are clear in our determination that that cannot happen without a response from NATO and we have set out clearly what that response might be.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): I congratulate the Foreign Secretary on the level of diplomatic unity that he has achieved on the objectives that he has laid out to the House this afternoon. However, he should bear it in mind, when he upbraids my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), that it was the Prime Minister's press secretary who described the results of the Foreign Secretary's previous efforts as dithering and disunited. Will he explain to the House what authority has been delegated to the Secretary-General of NATO to do what and with what military forces in the light of the response of both parties? How much authority over the control of its armed forces has the United Kingdom given away in response to the military events of the next few days?

Will the Foreign Secretary explain from where the troops who will be used in the long-term control and protection of the settlement will come? It is rumoured in the newspapers today that 8,000 British soldiers may be involved in the initial stages but, as the strategic defence review made clear, we have the capacity to deploy a formation only for one six-month spell.

Mr. Cook: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his congratulations, and I assure him that I come to the House with the full backing of the Contact Group of the North Atlantic Council, of the Security Council—and also of the press spokesman for the Prime Minister.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether we had given away control of British forces. Of course we have done no such thing: what we have done is participate as full members of an alliance that has a procedure for joint decision making. Part of our procedure has always been that, towards the end of the political decision making, we hand over authority for action to the military membership.

In this case, we have handed over the authority for action to Javier Solana, the NATO Secretary-General, but we would, of course, expect consultation before any further step is taken. Indeed, the conclusions of the North Atlantic Council explicitly state that he will take into account the Contact Group's assessment of the responses. I can therefore tell the hon. Gentleman that I am totally confident that there will be further consultation with Britain before any action that involves our forces takes place.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): May I offer my compliments to my right hon. Friend? In terms of political developments, should the Kosovo Albanians not be urged to play the long game? From their point of view, it makes good sense that there should be an autonomous administration long before there can be any talk of self-determination. However, does not military force or action have to be legitimised by international law and by the support of the United Nations Security Council? If there are not to be American troops on the ground there, what role will the American Administration play in what is, essentially, a European problem?

Mr. Cook: First, I strongly endorse my hon. Friend's point about the interim character of the Contact Group

proposals. The Kosovo Liberation Army does not give up any issue of principle in coming to negotiate on the three-year interim period; nor, for that matter, does Belgrade, by taking part in those negotiations, compromise on any issue of principle about the long-term future of Kosovo. My hon. Friend is right to say that those who want there to be an independent Kosovo—and that does not embrace the Contact Group—would be well advised to take this opportunity to create the democratic structures that would establish a political community within Kosovo which, if independence were to be the outcome at some future date, could be ready to take that extra step. However, for the time being, we propose a democratic, self-governing Kosovo within the Federal Republic but with extensive control over its own affairs.

My hon. Friend asked also about the legal base for any action. We are clear that we have legal authority for action to prevent humanitarian catastrophe and we are all deeply worried that we shall be looking at just such a catastrophe unless we are able to get a political settlement under way. I stress to my hon. Friend and to the House that the proposal that I have outlined this afternoon was welcomed unanimously by the Security Council and that no permanent member disagreed with it.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): As a relative newcomer to the sponsorship of the concept of military deterrence, does the Foreign Secretary appreciate that the best chance of deterring an aggressor is to be as specific as possible in stating what military action will follow if that aggressor fails to comply with requirements? Therefore, when the right hon. Gentleman talks about the possibility of military action against Serbia, will he spell out clearly whether he means that it will be simply air action, unsupported by anything else? Does he mean that such action will take place only in the disputed area of Kosovo, or will it extend to Serbia itself?

Mr. Cook: As for late converts, the hon. Gentleman may like to remember that many people on the Labour Benches condemned Saddam Hussein while the hon. Gentlemen of the Conservative party were arming him.

On the hon. Gentleman's question about military intervention, I frankly believe that there is a lot of merit in keeping President Milosevic guessing about exactly what we would do. The hon. Gentleman is, however, quite correct to say that, if there were military action, it is unlikely that it could be confined to the province of Kosovo.

Mr. John Austin (Erith and Thamesmead): May I join my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) and others in congratulating the Foreign Secretary on his determination and perseverance in bringing about a viable political settlement that all sides to the dispute should adopt? However, will my right hon. Friend tell the parties involved that the agreement is for the interim, that there will be final status negotiations in three years' time, and that there is no possibility of the international community's countenancing any change in the internationally recognised borders of Macedonia or Albania? Will he also tell them categorically that nothing is ruled out of the final options, including the possibility of an independent Kosovo?

Mr. Cook: I took an opportunity during my visit to Skopje to see the Foreign Minister of Macedonia and to ensure him of our continuing commitment to the territorial integrity of Macedonia. We have set out a number of principles for the negotiations. We regard them not as matters for negotiation, but as points to guide the parties in their negotiation of the framework document. One of the principles is respect for the territorial integrity of the Federal Republic and of neighbouring countries. Another is that there should be no unilateral change to the territorial integrity of any party in the area from which the parties to the talks come.

My hon. Friend is right to say that we are discussing an interim period, and that a review clause will provide for a review under international auspices and with international mediation. At present, no particular outcome is ruled out, but I hope that all sides will come to the talks ready to make a serious effort to achieve stability during the three-year period. If Belgrade wishes Kosovo to remain in the Federal Republic at the end of the three-year period, the best way to achieve that is to demonstrate that the Kosovo Albanians can have a future of peace, stability and freedom from repression within the Federal Republic.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): In the unwelcome event of military action by NATO, can the Foreign Secretary make any plans to protect the civilian population, and to deliver humanitarian aid to the people of Kosovo?

Mr. Cook: We are already extensively involved in humanitarian aid in Kosovo, and Britain is one of the major donors to the efforts of the International Committee of the Red Cross and the United Nations. Plainly, if military action were to be taken, I would certainly seek to avoid an impact on the civilian population. I cannot guarantee that there will be no such impact, but that will be a heavy factor in our consideration of whether to proceed with military action.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the part that he played in putting together the peace package. Does he agree that, if troops are to be used to build confidence between the two sides, they must be introduced speedily to become part of the negotiations? Does he further agree that military action by NATO would make almost impossible both the use of ground troops and peace in the foreseeable future?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend is right to say that the reason for deployment of ground troops would be to provide the confidence and reassurance on the ground in which we can start the process of reconstructing a democratic, self-governing Kosovo. His argument also has force when he says that progress in the political settlement would be more difficult to achieve in the wake of military action. However, if no progress can be made, we would not be losing progress by taking military action.

Belgrade must reckon carefully on the options available. One option is to take part in the talks, and to secure a future not only for itself but for the Serb community in Kosovo. If Belgrade fails to take that option, it should not doubt our resolve and willingness to press home with what we have committed ourselves to do

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in the North Atlantic Council. I hope that it will not come to that, but it is very much in the hands of Belgrade to respond positively to an offer that is in its own interests.

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his balanced statement. Does he agree that, if in these grave circumstances NATO were to use force against the belligerents, although Yugoslav targets might be readily identifiable, the nature of the KLA guerrilla force means that it might shelter among the civilian population and it would be almost impossible to take action against it? If that were tried, there would be grave consequences for the civilian population.

Mr. Cook: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comment on my balanced statement, which I take as a compliment. His assessment of the KLA is right. I cannot add or detract from what he said because it was fair comment. The KLA should not ignore the fact that its behaviour will be a factor in whether military action is taken against Belgrade. There could be no question of the North Atlantic Council authorising action against Belgrade for failing to take part in talks if the KLA fails to take part in them. We are keen to ensure that we use all the levers to try to achieve progress towards peace and stability, but we are not going to be conscripted as the KLA's air force.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): In considering the composition of the ground troops who may be sent in, has the Foreign Secretary taken account of the fact that, within living memory, tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of Serbs were killed by German troops? The survivors of those massacres are still there. Might that factor influence the composition of ground forces?

Mr. Cook: German troops are already present in Macedonia, where they are welcome and ready to take part in any extraction force necessary in relation to the verification mission. I hope that it will not be necessary to provide a military expedition to secure the verifiers because we have a clear commitment from Belgrade to look after their safety. Any ground troops would be committed in support of a political settlement. One therefore hopes that, as both sides would have supported such a settlement, they would welcome the ground troops who would give it an opportunity to work. My principal frustration in trying to achieve progress in the western Balkans is the readiness of all sides to disappear into the period of history in which their grievances began. If we are to make progress at Rambouillet, I hope that both sides come to look to the future, not the past.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): The Foreign Secretary has said several times, in this statement and elsewhere, that British ground troops might be deployed to police a settlement. Has he absolutely ruled out the possibility that they will be deployed not in Kosovo but in Serbia in the event of the failure of such a settlement?

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman invites me to contemplate a military action that we have not considered and do not have in contemplation. I therefore do not intend to rule it out or in, but I would want to think long and hard before embracing the proposal that he made.

Mr. Cash: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We have had an important statement this afternoon, but many hon. Members and the public might have expected another on the public sector pay settlement. It is outrageous that we have not been given an opportunity to question Ministers, given today's Downing street statement that the Government will use the House of Commons as a proper forum in which to air the nation's grievances.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): As the hon. Gentleman knows, that is not a matter for the Chair. However, Ministers will have heard what he had to say.

Orders of the Day

House of Lords Bill

Order for Second Reading read.—[Queen's consent, on behalf of the Crown, and Prince of Wales's consent, on behalf of the Duchy of Cornwall, signified.]

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I should inform the House that Madam Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

4.15 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The most important thing about the Bill, and what should be the most important thing about this debate and this issue, is that it is all very simple. What our manifesto said is simple and this legislation is simple—and we can best judge it if we recognise the almost exquisite simplicity of what it proposes. The Bill removes the right presently enjoyed by some 750 people—almost 100 more than the total number of Members elected to the House—to sit and vote in our Parliament solely on the basis of their birth and without any consideration whatever of their personal qualities or achievements. The Bill will modernise the way in which we handle legislation, improve our Parliament and so lead to a better Britain.

Hereditary peers lose the right to an automatic place in Parliament in clause 1. They should then have the right of any citizen to vote, and to stand for and to be a Member of this House without disclaiming their peerages. That is the effect of clause 2. Clause 3 makes consequential repeals to the Peerage Act 1963, and clause 4 brings the main provisions of the Act into force at the end of the Session in which it is passed, cancels the existing writs of summons that otherwise run for a whole Parliament, and provides for a power to ensure that peers can register as parliamentary electors for the first register that comes into force after they leave the Lords.

The proposals follow precisely those in our manifesto: to remove the right of hereditary peers to sit and vote in our legislature as

"an initial self-contained reform, not dependent on further reform in the future."

It has been suggested that an amendment may be moved from the Cross Benches in the House of Lords whereby some 90 or so of the 750 might remain in the transitional House until the second stage of reform. The Government have made it clear from the outset that we would prefer to proceed by consensus. However, if such a proposal is made in the Lords and the Government's legislative programme is not being frustrated, we are minded to accept it. Even with such an amendment, the automatic rights of hereditary peers would have been removed and those elected by their peers would serve in a personal capacity—their heirs would not inherit their seats.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): I wonder whether my right hon. Friend can help me regarding the mechanisms of the Bill. If the Lords amendment is moved and accepted by the House and the Government, and peers elect their contemporaries for the purpose of the transitional arrangements, will there be a statutory provision or will they be created peers and life peers again? On what basis will they sit once their right to sit as hereditary peers is removed by the Bill?

Mrs. Beckett: With respect to my right hon. Friend, they are precisely the matters that will be addressed by the amendment that will, no doubt, be moved in another place. It is the other place's amendment, not ours, and I do not propose to address it today.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Is the right hon. Lady saying that, if a similar amendment is moved in this place, the Government are not minded to accept it?

Mrs. Beckett: No such proposal appears in the Bill as it stands and nor do the Government intend to insert it.

Sir Patrick Cormack *rose—*

Mrs. Beckett: I am about to answer the hon. Gentleman's question. If an amendment is moved in this place, I shall advise my right hon. and hon. Friends to vote against it—and I shall tell the hon. Gentleman why. Should the Bill be actually obstructed in the Lords, despite being a clear manifesto pledge, or should it appear that the consensus and good faith for which we hope are lacking, then it is to this simple Bill that we would wish to apply the Parliament Acts so that the legislation can be carried in this Parliament, albeit after a delay.

The Government have provided for a two-day Second Reading debate for two reasons: first, the Bill, although short, is momentous in its effects; and, secondly, we recognise that hon. Members may want to range over matters relating to the White Paper. I intend to focus on the content of the Bill. In tomorrow's debate, my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department, will focus on the transitional House.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Before the right hon. Lady moves on, I should like to return to the matter raised by my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack). Is the right hon. Lady saying that if an amendment were to be tabled in this House of the type referred to, she would invite her right hon. and hon. Friends to vote against it? She intends, in effect, to put a pistol to the heads of Members of the upper House. If that is the case, the word that would be applied in the courts is blackmail, but as I am sure that that is not a parliamentary expression, shall we simply call it threatening behaviour by the Government?

Mrs. Beckett: Absolute claptrap. The matter is simple and straightforward: this is what the Government said that we intended to do and it is what we propose to do. We are perfectly willing to work with members of the House of Lords if that is what they want, in order to allow some of them to remain on the basis that is being discussed. However, the Government propose to act as we have set out in the Bill itself.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North-East Bedfordshire): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Beckett: There is not much point, but I shall give way to the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell).

Sir Nicholas Lyell: Will the right hon. Lady explain to the House whether she thinks it right and desirable that existing hereditary peers, who play a substantial part in the present role of the House of Lords, should continue to be able to play such a part during the transitional period? If she agrees that it is right and that that is why the Government would accept the amendment, why are they not prepared to include such a provision in a Bill to which they could apply the Parliament Acts?

Mrs. Beckett: I have just given the right hon. and learned Gentleman the reason. What he is discussing is not the Government's proposal; the Government's proposal was in our manifesto and it is before the House today. We are prepared to take, on advisement, other proposals that might come from another place. We are prepared to consider them not unsympathetically, but we are not prepared to run the risk of the Bill before us today not being the same Bill, in essence, when it leaves this House.

Mr. Cash: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Beckett: I will, but then I must get on.

Mr. Cash: Given the drastic treatment that the Government propose for the House of Lords and the peremptory manner in which they are introducing it, will the right hon. Lady be good enough to tell us whether she proposes to use the guillotine at some point during the proceedings?

Hon. Members: On the peers.

Mrs. Beckett: Neither on the peers, nor on the Bill. As I hope to show later in my speech, to call the measure drastic is to put it a little high; it is certainly long overdue.

I turn now from what we are doing—modernising our Parliament and delivering better government—and how we are doing that in this Bill, to why we are doing it. To have a legislature in which 750 people are entitled to sit by virtue of their birth alone is utterly, totally, literally, indefensible. It is indefensible in principle and indefensible in practice. It simply cannot be defended.

As has often been said, if one went to the airport and was told that the pilot did not himself have a pilot's licence, but that there was no need to worry because his grandfather had a licence, one simply would not get on the plane. However, we do not need to rely on analogy; we can rest on experience.

A few weeks ago, for example, the 12th Earl of Dunmore flew from his home in Tasmania to take his seat in the House of Lords for the first time. He explained his action as a gesture—almost, I suppose, a sentimental gesture to his forebears—and a recognition of his heritage. I am not attacking him for that. He has that right, even if his journey sounded like a particularly superior kind of tourist trip. In fact, far from attacking him, I am extremely grateful to him. What the Earl did demonstrates that unless we pass the Bill, he can go on popping in whenever the fancy takes him for the rest of his life, and his heirs after him.

In his one pleasantly unassuming person, the Earl destroys with brutal clarity the Opposition's case. In their 1997 campaign guide, they said that

"it is important to defend the hereditary principle in its own right."

Really? It was reported that the 12th Earl of Dunmore was born in Australia, has always lived in Australia and had never even visited this country before. Yet he and another 61 hereditary peers who no longer even make their home in Britain can, if they choose, turn up, take the taxpayer's shilling towards their expenses—taxes to which they may well not contribute—and exercise their right to speak and vote on our health service, our schools and our housing. They have the power to affect all our lives and then just go home.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): If the right hon. Lady wants to proceed from these particular examples to a general conclusion, why did she not frame the Bill to exclude people who do not live in this country? If she wants to use another example, why does she not get on with it, instead of concentrating on a minority of peers who are untypical of the hard work and long hours put in here by the overwhelming majority?

Mrs. Beckett: Getting on with it is precisely what we intend to do and what the Opposition apparently do not want.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for giving way, particularly as she says that she wants to get on with it. Given that she claims to attach great importance to a thoroughgoing reform of the House of Lords, why is she unable this afternoon to give the House an indicative timetable within which full reform will be completed? Will the right hon. Lady at least assure the House that she expects reform to be completed within her remaining political lifetime?

Mrs. Beckett: Yes, I can definitely give that assurance.

I concede that the great hereditary principle that the Opposition want to defend allows a mere 62 foreign residents a place in our legislature at present. But on what basis did the remaining 688 find a place?

Some undoubtedly did so as a result of the public service performed by their forebears, but even if they are themselves assiduous in their public service, it is not on that basis that their own place has been earned. Others, as we all know, benefited from dubious favours—sometimes sexual, sometimes financial—performed for past monarchs, sometimes centuries past. I hope that I am not being too offensive when I say that, looking at a very long list, it is no longer apparent how others got their place at all. Whether or not hereditary peers are qualified to legislate is academic. The fact is that they do not have to be qualified.

It is not only the hereditary principle that is indefensible, but what happens in practice because its effect is to perpetuate a 3:1 permanent in-built majority for the Tory party over the Labour party in the House of Lords.

When lost for any argument of merit about the Lords, Tory Members and Tory commentators are prone to fall back on the line, "Well, it works", as the Leader of the Opposition said the other day. It works for them, all right.

The hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) made a fascinating but unintentionally revealing comment in response to my statement on the matter on 20 January.

"We will go into the next general election,"

he said,

"without knowing what Parliament will look like on the other side of that election."—[*Official Report*, 20 January 1999; Vol. 323, c. 912.]

Yes, that is what happens at general elections, at least in this House.

Of course the Conservatives are used to one half of Parliament staying the same—staying 3:1 Tory, no matter what happens at the general election. For example, in the last general election, the Conservative party got 34 per cent. of the popular vote, but it has 66 per cent. of the membership of the House of Lords. The Labour party got 48 per cent. of the popular vote in that election, but still had only 24 per cent. of the membership of the House of Lords.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I am grateful to the Leader of the House. I do not expect her to have the exact figures at her fingertips, but in developing the case of the Tory-dominated upper House, can she give the House some idea of the number of times that that Tory-dominated House voted against legislation or measures initiated by the previous Conservative Government?

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. I am coming to precisely that point.

Defenders of the present system like to pretend, as the right hon. Gentleman endeavoured to suggest, that the House of Lords is even-handed between Labour and Tory Governments. It is sometimes suggested that it is only if a Labour Government have lost popularity and ground that peers begin to flex their muscles, responding to a shift in the popular will. Rubbish.

No Labour Government have ever had a bigger mandate than this one, and even the most staunch Conservative will hardly yet claim an irresistible surge of popular support towards that party. Yet even in this Parliament, the House of Lords has—almost always on the balance of votes of hereditary peers—defeated us almost three times more often, on average, than it did the previous Tory Government, even at the depths of that Government's unpopularity and rejection, and after the gradual withering of their majority. Nor is that the slightest bit unusual. For decades, the track record of the House that the Conservative party calls independent has been persistent obstruction of Labour Governments, with occasional rejection of the Tories.

If ever the people needed the claimed protection of the House of Lords, they needed it when, some 600 years after it was first tried, a British Government were again stupid enough and unjust enough to introduce a poll tax. What protection did the people get from the House of Lords? With a few honourable exceptions, the Lords waved the poll tax on its way, rejoicing.

In this Parliament, on the votes of hereditary peers, the Lords have tried to make exceptions to the handguns ban following Dunblane, to undermine the phasing-out of assisted places in some schools, and to put in exceptions to the national minimum wage.

Some Opposition Members have started to say that they do not mind the House of Lords being replaced, as long as it is replaced with something better. Anything would be better. It is impossible to imagine a system for selecting a legislature that is worse than selecting the first-born child—mostly only the first-born male child—of the same named families in perpetuity, irrespective of whether that person is even the most interested or best qualified among the members of those families. Talk about first come, first served.

Dr. Julian Lewis: I thank the right hon. Lady for giving way. She seems to be objecting to the randomness of the hereditary principle. She says that anything would be better than that. By the same token, would it be better if people were judged by juries that were appointed, rather than selected at random?

Mrs. Beckett: No one is selected at random to enter this House or the House of Lords. Members of the House of Lords are placed there as a result of patronage. In the transitional House, the situation would certainly be better because at least everyone in it would be there as a result of what he or she had done, and not as a result of what his or her great-great-grandfather did.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Beckett: This will be the last time that I give way because I know how many hon. Members want to speak, and I want to get on.

Mr. Robathan: I find the right hon. Lady's revelling in many years of class warfare both interesting and amusing. I agree with much of what she says, but will she state categorically that she believes that the present Leader of the House of Lords would be there even if it were not a fact that her father was a Labour Prime Minister?

Mrs. Beckett: That is an insufferably insulting assertion, which the hon. Gentleman repeatedly makes. My right hon. and noble Friend the Leader of the House of Lords is in that position because of her own abilities, qualities and achievements; she is not there in the place of her father, as everyone in the country is perfectly well aware.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mrs. Beckett: I am happy to give way to one of my hon. Friends, but it must be for the last time.

Dr. Starkey: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that a considerable number of hon. Members of this House are the daughters or sons of Members of Parliament, which does not imply that they are here only because of their birth, but that they have been elected on their own merits? Is not that precisely the point that my right hon. Friend was attempting to make about the current Leader of the House of Lords?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is right. As I said, should the Bill pass into law, it will remain the case that all those entitled to serve in the House of Lords will be there as a result of their own achievements.

[Mrs. Beckett]

As for the ridiculous nonsense about the House of Lords being a House of "Tony's cronies", even if all the hereditary peers were to go at once, in the transitional House—still 500 strong—there would still be a 2:1 majority over Labour. The Tory party has never thought that its huge majority among hereditary peers was enough, and when in government, consistently created twice as many Tory as Labour life peers as well. To listen to today's Tory party, anyone would think that this Prime Minister had created vast and unprecedented numbers of Labour peers, whereas only half the peers created in this Parliament have been Labour peers. That is why we are still in a minority, even among life peers.

Far from being stuffed with Tony's cronies, it is nearer the truth to say—with deep respect to the Father of the House—that the House of Lords is stuffed with Ted's cronies, Margaret's cronies and John's cronies. Today's life peers result from the actions of eight Prime Ministers over 40 years, and each of them was put there on the basis of his or her own contribution to public life. This Prime Minister will be the first to give up even a fraction of his powers of patronage.

Mr. Bercow: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Beckett: No, I am sorry.

The Prime Minister is to forgo his right of veto over the names nominated by leaders of other parties. He is to give up to an independent appointments commission his right to nominate Cross-Bench peers. The Government have also made it plain that we shall not seek more than parity in numbers with the Conservative party in the transitional House, and that we do not believe that any party should seek a majority in the House of Lords. I look forward to hearing the Conservative party spokesman say the same.

There remains one further major argument about the nature of the Government's proposals: that stages 1 and 2 of reform should go together, that it is too soon to get rid of hereditary peers, and that they should not go until we have decided just what should replace them.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Beckett: No, I am awfully sorry. I must get on. I feel confident that I could answer the hon. Gentleman's point.

Mr. Grieve: The right hon. Lady does not know what it is yet.

Mrs. Beckett: I do.

There is a flaw in that, at first sight, reasonable argument, and it is really a rather large flaw. It is that the Conservative party has been deploying that argument, with every appearance of sincerity, for 88 years.

The Conservative party conceded officially that the hereditary principle had to go at the start of this century, but if it has its way today, that will still be the basis of the House of Lords at the start of the next century. What is more, if we listen to these siren voices and leave all the hereditaries in place, we shall leave them—for they are the largest number—in charge. They could dictate what would replace them, and so continue to perpetuate the hold on power that they now enjoy.

While the hereditaries remain, not only their votes, but their voices bedevil any proper consideration of what stage 2 ought to be. Previous attempts at reform have all failed precisely because stage 1 and stage 2 were taken together. We all know that there are those—even in this House, let alone in the House of Lords—whose real desire is to preserve the Lords as it is now, with membership and all, permanent Tory majority and all.

These people have never had to come clean, because for the past 88 years, they have been able to tie everybody else up in knots by asserting that, of course, they are willing to go when their day comes, but first, they must insist on knowing exactly what will replace them. Divide and rule has been their principle: they have always been able to divide those who wanted change and that is why, after 88 years, they still rule.

In fact, I believe that we will never get a sensible, mature debate about what stage 2 ought to be while that debate is dominated, as it always has been, by the self-interest of today's House of Lords and of the Conservative party, and not by the national interest.

In the meantime, we have dealt with the argument, "We don't know what will follow the abolition of the rights of hereditary peers." What will initially replace the hereditaries will be a transitional House, which will be much better—because it will be based on the achievements of today's membership—than the one it will replace.

That brings me to the last, desperate argument of the opponents of change: "If it ain't broke," they say, "don't fix it." A membership of 750 hereditary peers—not even the best qualified in their families, just the first—that is broke. A permanent 3:1 Tory majority—whatever the outcome of the general election—that is broke. The Lords having as many powers to handle legislation as the House of Commons, which they mostly choose to use to revise legislation, but which they could use to block legislation and stop it in its tracks, and to destroy the legislative programme of an elected Government—that is broke.

In 1911—when the Conservative party of the day displayed more enlightenment than its present-day successor and first conceded the end of the hereditary principle in our legislature—some men had two votes, a few still had no vote and no women could vote, let alone stand for Parliament. In those 88 years, our country has changed beyond recognition, our society has changed beyond recognition and it is long past time that our Parliament changed too; 750 people are Members of the House of Lords by accident of birth.

Almost all those people are men; almost all are white; most have little, if any, experience of school, health care or housing in common with most of their fellow countrymen and countrywomen. Like everyone else, they have a place in our national life, but it is not in our Parliament.

4.44 pm

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): I beg to move, To leave out from "That" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"this House declines to give a Second Reading to the House of Lords Bill as it fails to address the role of the Second Chamber, its relationship to this House and its long term composition and hence,

rather than improving the governance of the United Kingdom by establishing a sustainable, balanced and effective constitution, it merely adds to the incoherence of Her Majesty's Government's piecemeal constitutional changes."

There are two parallel but distinct debates. There is the debate about the Government's small-minded proposals for so-called reform of the House of Lords, which is piecemeal, incoherent and unsustainable. There is also a genuine debate about the reform of Parliament as a whole, which will come about because it is required and because it is being made more necessary and being expedited by the Government's piecemeal, and therefore unstable, constitutional changes.

This debate is not about the Government's democratic legitimacy in proposing a plan that, as the Leader of the House of Commons, reasonably pointed out, was in their manifesto. It is about the wisdom of doing so in the way that they have, and about the Government's motives. In a strange twist, we are not having to defend the hereditary principle because the Government are not attacking it. They have made it clear that they do not question the hereditary principle in relation to the monarchy, but in signalling their willingness to accept the Weatherill proposals in the House of Lords for the transitional phase, neither are they questioning the principle in relation to the other place. We do not know how long the transitional phase will last.

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): Is the hon. Gentleman not aware of the fact that the monarchy, although it may be based on the hereditary principle, no longer has a veto over the legislation of the House? Does that not make a bit of a difference?

Dr. Fox: The monarchy is not an example of the hereditary principle; it is the embodiment of it. The Leader of the House and her hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) are arguing that it is not the hereditary principle, but the issue of to which part of the constitution it is applied that is at stake. That is very different from attacking the hereditary principle itself, and perhaps the hon. Lady should think through her argument before she intervenes again.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Would not it be more logical for the hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) to argue that the monarchy should lose its right to give assent for Bills to become Acts of Parliament?

Dr. Fox: It would be logical from what the hon. Lady says, but I suspect that she reflects the opinion of Labour Back Benchers rather than that of the Government. I am sure that that will come out later in the debate.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Fox: No, I shall make some progress if I may.

The tone and language used by the Leader of the House are disturbing. Despite the fact that she does not believe that hereditary peers should remain in the other place, she would have done well to thank those who have given tremendous service over the years, whether hereditary or life peers, to Parliament and to the governance of our country. This tone of spite and resentment is an unwelcome addition to the debate. If the House of Lords as currently constituted has worked well, it is because of the calibre of those peers and their willingness to engage in public service for, it must be said, a good deal less than the remuneration of Members of the House of Commons.

Mr. Nigel Griffiths (Edinburgh, South): Is the hon. Gentleman, on behalf of the Opposition, defending the right of the 62 foreign-based nationals to sit in the House of Lords, or does he have proposals to tackle that?

Dr. Fox: The hon. Gentleman should be wondering about Scottish MPs and their right to vote in this Parliament post-devolution, instead of worrying about other foreign nationals.

We must ask ourselves how the Government arrived at their current position. They clearly know what and whom they dislike, so they know what they want to abolish. However, so little is their understanding of the constitutional complexities, they have no idea of what to replace the House of Lords with. The right hon. Lady says, "We know what we will replace it with. We will replace it with a royal commission, which will think about how it proposes to replace it. Then we will have a joint committee, which will think about what the royal commission has already thought about." That is supposed to be clear and decisive government. The Government have started yet another constitutional initiative without any idea of how it will finish.

The Government's obsession with composition rather than function shows their lack of understanding of the role or necessity of a second Chamber, and how much these changes are based on their perceived party advantage. It was interesting that, in previous debates, the only interventions were on the question of which party had the greater advantage. [*Laughter.*] I accept that there is a Conservative advantage in the upper House, and I shall come to that in a moment. No one in the real world could fail to recognise that fact, but there must be better reasons for reforming part of our Parliament than that.

Of course, the Government did not even want a royal commission. They were pushed into having one, against their will, as a fig leaf to cover the intellectual nakedness of their argument. The prelude was the White Paper. In her speech, the Leader of the House returned to the sort of interesting arithmetic of which the new Secretary of State for Trade and Industry might have been proud. In the White Paper, she states that there are 476 Conservatives in the House of Lords, out of a total of 1,165. To me, that says "41 per cent.". The next sentence reads:

"As can be seen, the Conservatives have a clear majority over the other parties overall".

This is the least informative and most incoherent White Paper with which we have been presented for a long time. It is a second-rate propaganda sheet, which would have failed the Advertising Standards Authority's "legal, decent, honest and truthful" test. It is a complete distortion of the facts. I am sorry that the right hon. Lady chose to reiterate those "facts" today, when she said that the

[Dr. Fox]

Conservatives had an overall majority in the House of Lords. Perhaps she would like to take this opportunity to correct her arithmetic.

Mrs. Beckett: As the hon. Gentleman would have heard if he had been listening, I referred throughout my remarks to those who are entitled to sit in the House of Lords.

Dr. Fox: The clear impression given in black and white by the White Paper—from which I quoted a moment ago—and given by other Ministers is that the Conservatives have an overall majority in the House of Lords. I am glad that the right hon. Lady has just confirmed that that is untrue.

The Government's case is a masterpiece of rewritten history and distorted logic. First, we were told by the Leader of the House of Lords—the right hon. Lady repeated it today—that we cannot have one-stage reform, because hereditary peers have blocked previous attempts at it. [HON. MEMBERS: "True."] I hear "true" from the Government Front Bench. It is worth pointing out, however, that the last reform, in 1967-68, was accepted by the upper House, but blocked in the House of Commons. It was not hereditary, life or any other peers who blocked that reform; it was blocked by this House.

Secondly, the right hon. Lady says that there must be speedy reform. Anyone can see, however, that a two-stage reform could take longer than a one-stage reform: any interim House's establishment could be held up by the Parliament Acts, and the process for the second stage might have to start all over again. The only reasonable reading is that the Government want to scrap the hereditary peers, and then kick the whole process into the long grass.

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): So far, the hon. Gentleman has criticised the Government for having a royal commission and for being forced into having a royal commission when they did not want one, for excessive speed and for embarking on a process that he thinks will take too long. What is his position? Does he accept that a change of this magnitude requires public consultation before the final form of the House of Lords is settled, or would he prefer the Government to produce a final proposal and force it through?

Dr. Fox: Our position has always been clear. We want a single-stage reform if there is to be reform, and we believe that it should be preceded by public consultation. That is why we set up a commission under the former Lord Chancellor, Lord Mackay—nearly a year ahead of the Government's proposals for a royal commission, which they were pushed into precisely because of our wider proposals.

Let me take up the right hon. Lady's point about general elections. She was trite but predictable when she said that we never know what Parliament will look like before we go into a general election; but we do know what the structure of Parliament will look like when we go into a general election. Because it is clear that the Government have no intention of pushing through a reform before the next general election, the public will be asked to vote without knowing what the structure of their Parliament will be by the end of its Session, and that is something that we have not experienced before. It means asking the people to accept that the form of their government is to change, without knowing what it will be. That is the point that I was making; the right hon. Lady was being purposely obtuse.

Mr. Bercow: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Phil Hope (Corby): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I call Mr. Hope.

Dr. Fox: I will give way to my hon. Friend first, and then to the hon. Member for Corby (Mr. Hope).

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to my hon. Friend—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Dr. Fox: I said that I would give way first to my hon. Friend.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That was not very clear, if I may say so. I had already called the hon. Member for Corby (Mr. Hope).

Mr. Hope: I have listened to the hon. Gentleman for about 10 minutes and I am still confused. I should be grateful if he would clarify the position: do the Opposition support, or not support, the hereditary principle—yes or no?

Dr. Fox: We have made it perfectly clear that the hereditary principle in itself is not something that we challenge. Nor is it something that is challenged by the Government in their position towards the monarchy, but we accept that the Government made their policy clear in their manifesto and that change will happen. Therefore, the debate is not about whether we will defend the rights of hereditary peers; we have accepted that those rights in the House of Lords are to end. The argument is about how we wish the House of Lords to be constituted.

Mr. Bercow: Does my hon. Friend agree that any worthwhile reform of the House of Lords should not be power neutral, but strengthen the power of the legislature in relation to the Executive in general, and in relation to the position and powers of the Prime Minister in particular?

Dr. Fox: I hope that my hon. Friend will forgive me if I wait some time before I come to that matter. I wish to deal with it in some detail.

We have to ask what sort of model for Parliament the Government seek in the Bill. Do the Government want an effective revising Chamber? It seems not because they seem to want, effectively, one-Chamber government, where the Executive are in control. They seem to want a Commons that is merely a rubber stamp for the Executive, in the same way as the Cabinet, with its half-hour sessions, is merely a rubber stamp for the Prime Minister's inner circle.

That is why the second Chamber is to be reduced to a quango. Of course, there will be a new appointments commission. Of course, the Prime Minister will give up his right to appoint Cross Benchers—big deal; we know who will appoint the appointments commission. Knowing that it lacks either legitimacy or longevity, the interim Chamber—the halfway house—will be a pliant, supplicant body.

That reflects perfectly the Prime Minister's instincts. He is not democrat man; he is Executive man. That is perhaps nowhere better exemplified than in the amendments that the Government say that they are willing to accept—the so-called Weatherill proposals. That reflects the Prime Minister's preference for expediency over principle.

The Leader of the House reiterated what was clearly in the Labour party manifesto, yet we now hear that 91 hereditary peers will survive in the interim Chamber, and she said that the previous one lasted for 80 years; that is, they will survive if they are good girls and boys and if they have the intellectual rigour, independence of mind and parliamentary tenacity of the so-called Blair babes.

Mrs. Beckett: If the hon. Gentleman does not wish those peers to remain, the remedy is simple: he can vote for the Bill.

Dr. Fox: I understand the procedural excuse that has been given by the right hon. Lady, but the Government have signalled in advance that they will accept something that is utterly out of step with their manifesto—they will accept hereditary peers remaining and voting in the House of Lords. However, that proposal will be introduced only in the House of Lords, so a major constitutional change will not be debated in this Chamber and, if it is, it will be rejected by the Government in this Chamber—the Chamber that the Government claim has democratic legitimacy. It will be put forward in the House of Lords and fully debated in the Chamber that the Government claim has no democratic legitimacy. That is a perverse position for a Bill that supposedly strengthens our constitutional relationships. It says everything about the Government's relationship and respect for our democratic traditions.

Several questions remain unanswered. Perhaps the Minister can answer them tonight. If reform is such a priority, why was the royal commission not set up 20 months ago—a question that the hon. Member for Corby might like to ask? When was Lord Wakeham invited to chair the royal commission? I understand that, although it was such an important and fundamental appointment, he was asked to do so only 48 hours before the announcement. Will the Labour party give advice and evidence to the royal commission? Will it be in public? Will all the hearings be in public?

When will the new appointments system be set up? Why cannot it be set up now? We know the answer—so that the Prime Minister can pack the Chamber in advance. Have the Government ruled out a fully elected second Chamber? How do we know that we will get from stage one to stage two? How long will the Joint Committee last?

Those are all legitimate questions that should have been answered by the Leader of the House. They are not simply procedural things to be kicked into the long grass, as the Government want. Parliament should have answers to those questions as we start on the process of considering the Bill.

In answer to the point raised by hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), we are today engaged in a debate on an issue that is much bigger than the Bill and much wider than the Government's viewpoint. We are engaged in a serious debate that should, and does, cross party lines. The debate is about the case for real reform of Parliament as a whole.

I believe that we require a stronger Parliament. First, however, we shall have to decide not only what we want Parliament to do, but Parliament's relationship to the Executive, to the judiciary and to Europe. Only after we have decided what we want Parliament to do should we divide the powers between the two Houses—assuming that we believe in a bicameral system. Only then can we decide the membership and size of the two Chambers. Secondly, we need a stronger Parliament because of all the different trends that have emerged in our recent history.

Maria Eagle: The hon. Gentleman is using an argument—that we should decide everything now, except composition—that is similar to the one used by Austen Chamberlain in 1911, during the passage of the Parliament Act 1911. All one would have to do to make the two arguments exactly similar is to substitute the word "composition" for "powers". In 1911, the Conservative party was arguing that composition should be discussed, but that powers should not be. Nevertheless, the basis of the arguments is exactly the same: let us delay. Has the hon. Gentleman not learnt that we are fed up with delay and that we want action?

Dr. Fox: The hon. Lady raises several issues. The first is that, as my grandfather was barely a toddler in 1911, I cannot be held answerable for events in 1911. Secondly, things have moved on. I shall explain in a moment why I believe that we now have to have a different approach, and why the Opposition want reform to be made in one go. I am simply telling the hon. Lady and the House that we should have a wider perspective on the reform that we want.

The trend in our democratic history has been to move from unaccountability to accountability. Recently, however, there has been a reversal in that trend. We have had, for example, European directives and legislative initiation by an unelected Commission. Judicial activism is increasing, questioning ministerial decisions on the basis not of legality but of merit. The Human Rights Act 1998 will give us judge-made law. Closed election lists are being introduced in legislation, so that politicians, not people, will have powers. There has also been an increase in the Executive's power because of patronage and the Whip system.

The way in which we are governed has changed fundamentally. Since 1970, there has been a 23 per cent. reduction in the amount of primary legislation passed by Parliament, but a 52 per cent. increase in the amount of secondary legislation passed by Parliament. Is that legislation scrutinised properly? Do we as a Parliament feel that we properly scrutinise legislation—the laws by which we are governed?

Is there not a role for a strengthened upper House to take on precisely that function? Does not our consideration of this Bill provide an opportunity for us to

[Dr. Fox]

strengthen Parliament as a whole, and to ensure that our legislation is properly scrutinised, so that we can do our job properly?

Mr. James Plaskitt (Warwick and Leamington): As we are receiving a lecture from the hon. Gentleman, will he remind us what the Conservative party did in 18 years in government to strengthen the role of this House against the Executive?

Dr. Fox: After winning our landslide victory, one of the first things we did was to establish and strengthen Select Committees, which provide a way of scrutinising the Executive. Although it is legitimate to ask why, after 18 years in office, we did not introduce such proposals, I shall, in a moment, explain to the hon. Gentleman exactly how we did introduce such proposals.

There are several ways in which we could establish a strengthened second Chamber. Moreover, such a Chamber does not necessarily entail a weakened House of Commons. One of the House's failures in 1967–68 was to believe that any increase in the strength of the other place would cause a weakened Commons. Such an outcome is not inevitable.

Parliament currently does not perform certain functions. Is it democratically acceptable, for example, for a Minister—in a Government of whatever political complexion—to go to a Council of Ministers meeting and to agree to a directive that must be obeyed in British law although there was never any democratic scrutiny of that directive? Is there not a role somewhere in our legislature for providing such scrutiny? *[Interruption.]* I am appalled that there should be cat-calls from those on the Treasury Bench when I ask such a question. The House of Commons has to debate those legitimate issues.

Just as it was true with devolution that we could not change the constitution in one part of the kingdom without affecting the other parts, so we cannot reform the House of Lords without reforming the House of Commons. If we are serious about constitutional reform, we shall have to have a meaningful debate about the House of Commons.

There is invariably conflict for members of the governing party between the interests of Parliament and the interests of the party. That is unavoidable when the Executive sit in the legislature. Resolving that conflict is essential to our ability to protect the rights and liberties of those who elect us. Today will simply be the first part of that serious debate.

Reform is welcome if it improves the way in which the people of Britain are governed, but the Bill neither seeks that nor results in it. It has been brought forward out of spite. It is designed to put the Labour party first. It is piecemeal and incoherent, and it will be unstable. For the sake of the good governance of the United Kingdom, we shall oppose it.

5.6 pm

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): I strongly support the Bill. If the hereditary system were not so controversial, I should claim paternity of it. I was expelled from a Conservative-controlled House of Commons after I had sat here for 10 years on the ground that I was disqualified as a peer. I was re-elected and came back. I was sent to an election court, where two judges declared that a peerage was "an incorporeal hereditament affixed in the blood and annexed to the posterity". I was so curious that I went and had some blood taken out. I still have it, although I am afraid that it is clotted now.

On the basis of that judgment, the House thought that I was permanently disqualified from sitting here. I had many helpful letters. One man wrote and asked whether I could look up my birth certificate and see whether I was illegitimate, because if I was I would be all right. I also had a postcard from a Conservative peer saying that as far as he was concerned I was, but that had no legal validity.

I welcome the Bill. However, let us be clear about the House of Lords. There is no magic or mystery about it. Every generation has done what it liked with the House of Lords. For my sins, I had to read the history of the place. Let me give the House a few examples. When peerages began in 1272, they were not hereditary. The Prime Minister is going back to Edward I, modernising himself back to the middle ages. Only in 1387 were all peerages created by letters patent. One young man proposed to Edward IV's daughter and was made a duke. When he got his dukedom he decided that he would not marry her, so his dukedom was taken away. There was another lad in 1549, William West, whose uncle was Lord De La Warr. He wanted the peerage, so he tried to poison his uncle and he was disinherited for life. The House of Lords can do what it likes.

On 7 February 1649, when the House of Lords was abolished, Lord Salisbury got himself elected to the House of Commons—in the Cromwell period—first for King's Lynn and then for Hertford. The Cecils know where power is and they are always there. They are at it again.

The treaty of Utrecht was passed in 1713 by swamping the House of Lords. In 1876, when the Government wanted to have Law Lords who were not hereditary peers, they introduced life peerages for Law Lords. In 1911, the Parliament Act was carried under a threat of swamping. In 1917—

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster) *rose—*

Mr. Benn: I am finishing this little bit of history.

In 1917, there were some German peers, so the Government passed the Titles Deprivation Act 1917 to take peerages away from the King's cousins who happened to be Germans. The Duke of Cumberland went down the pan on that basis. Then there was the creation of life peerages in 1958, and further legislation in 1963. We live in this mysterious building, where we are taught that history is around us and that we have been a democracy since Magna Carta, but any Government can do what they like with the House of Lords.

I must warn my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House that although she has done away with tribalism, she has not gone an inch towards democracy. There is not one single democratic ingredient in the Bill that I will vote for tomorrow night.

Mr. Brooke: I was slightly surprised that the right hon. Gentleman omitted the original proposal to introduce life peers into the House of Lords in 1857, which was defeated by the Lords themselves.

Mr. Benn: I tried for ten years to get out of the place, but I will not go into that again. I have touched on my own interests, which I felt I had to declare under the Nolan rules.

From 1945 until today, 11 Prime Ministers—including the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath)—have created 1,082 peers. The right hon. Gentleman created a lot of peers during his premiership. It takes 43 million electors to elect 659 Members of Parliament. It took 10 men and one woman to appoint 1,082 life peers.

This proposal has no democratic element at all. We have a transitional scheme, under which 75 hereditary peers will elect each other. A person will be able to get into Parliament by three ways—by being elected by a constituency, by being elected by other hereditary peers or by appointment by the Prime Minister, with all risk of cronyism removed. In all fairness, that is not a democratic system.

Every life peer is unaccountable and irremovable, although my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House's comment that it did not follow that life peers would stay for life must have frightened some of them up the other end. Presumably, if Lord Wakeham comes up with a scheme, the life peers will go too.

I do not know when the second stage will come. Lord Wakeham is being assisted by my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) and others, and the royal commission must report by Christmas. There will then be the Joint Committee of both Houses. Following those debates, there will be legislation. However, I fear that the transitional scheme will be permanent—because it suits everybody at the top. The hereditary peers will have a corner of the other place, and the Prime Minister will retain his patronage.

Mr. Forth: On the assumption that the right hon. Gentleman stood with the rest of his colleagues on the Labour party manifesto, he will be aware that the first page of the White Paper says:

"Our objective will be to ensure that over time party appointees as life peers more accurately reflect the proportion of votes cast at the previous general election."

Even if the right hon. Gentleman accepts the nonsense contained in that statement—which suggests that there will continue to be life peers but that, as time rolls on, their composition will be changed to reflect each election—does he agree that he, as a loyal Labour Member who stood on that manifesto, has committed himself to the continuation of life peers?

Mr. Benn: I will leave my position to the end and I will make it clear that I will vote for the Bill. However, I will comment on the transitional and secondary stages.

It took 700 years to make the House of Commons democratic. When I was born, in 1925, women did not have the vote until they were 30. I have lived in the period when the House of Commons became democratic. I believe that it could well take as long to get a democratic second chamber—because the powers-that-be do not want a democratic second chamber.

The reason for that is that the person in Britain who needs the House of Lords more than anybody else is the Prime Minister of the day. That is one reason why the Prime Minister supports the monarchy. Every Prime Minister needs the monarchy to give him or her the Executive power to do all the things that Prime Ministers can do. It is interesting that Prime Ministers get their legislative majority from the electors and their Executive authority from the Crown. At some stage, we must address that question.

The present Prime Minister has created 55 peers since the election. That is probably no more than the average, which is about 22 a year. I hope that the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup speaks tomorrow, because the House must recognise that Prime Ministers desperately need the House of Lords to control, to reward and to create vacancies in the House of Commons. Nobody has ever offered it to me, but many Members have been told, "If you are ready to go, old boy, we could get you in the other place and then we will have the vacancy we want for somebody in the House of Commons." That is the reason the Lords have continued. It began with the king, who wanted his placemen there, and continues to the present day.

If we examine the prerogatives of the Prime Minister, in terms of appointments alone, we see that Prime Ministers appoint archbishops and bishops. Mrs. Thatcher appointed 26 bishops and archbishops. The Almighty himself would have been proud to have had such a record. The Prime Minister appoints all the judges. The Prime Minister appoints all the Commissioners in Brussels. The Prime Minister appoints Ministers and peers. Some say that Prime Ministers would like to appoint the mayor of London and the leader of the Labour party in Wales, but I shall not go into that. The Prime Minister's power of patronage is phenomenal.

The Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), mentioned the fact that the Prime Minister has many other powers. The Prime Minister can go to war without consulting Parliament, unlike in most civilised countries. The Prime Minister can sign treaties without consulting Parliament. The Prime Minister can make laws in Brussels without consulting Parliament. When I was on the Council of Ministers—I was President in 1977—every time I agreed to a directive in Brussels I was using the royal prerogative of treaty making. No consultation with Parliament was necessary.

What we really need—and I am drafting it now—is some legislation. I am going to call it the modernisation of the premiership Bill. Every other institution is being modernised, but we need to modernise the premiership. It has become, by default, a presidential system without the checks and balances that exist in the United States. In America, the President has no control over Congress. We know that from the trouble he is in at the moment. President Clinton cannot control the Congress or the Senate, but here we have a president with no checks or balances. I say that as no criticism of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, because Mrs. Thatcher was just the same and I dare say that the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup, who honours us with his continued presence, also exercised presidential powers. The process is on going.

My draft Bill will provide that all the Crown prerogatives exercised by the Prime Minister are subject to democratic vote in the House of Commons. It will be a simple Bill that will not even be an innovation. I do not know whether the House realises, but we can create peers ourselves. That is a bit of a puzzle, and I do not know whether anyone can tell me how we do so. I shall tell the House. When a Speaker retires, the House passes a humble address, praying that Her Majesty confer a signal mark of honour on whoever it is, Bernard Weatherill or Madam Speaker, in due course. We have established the

[Mr. Benn]

precedent of creating peers and, if we are to have a democratic Parliament and proper accountability, the House of Commons should restore itself instead of proceeding on the ground that it does everything it is told.

I shall vote for the Bill because, as I say, it abolishes feudalism. However, when we come to the second stage I must tell my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House that if she thinks that I shall vote for hereditary peers to elect other hereditary peers, she has made a big mistake. If she thinks that I will vote for more life peers made by the Prime Minister, she has made a big mistake. One of the ways in which the premiership can be held in check or balance is by free votes in the House of Commons. I am in favour of the House of Commons, on matters of this magnitude, exercising its free judgment. I have been here an unconscionably long time—[HON. MEMBERS: "No."] Well, I have. The more I look at this place, the more I fear that the House of Commons has surrendered its responsibility for representing people and has become a queue for office or for people hoping to get on the "Today" programme. I do not think that that is what we are all about.

I wish my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House good luck with the Bill. She made a passionate speech and her Bill will go through, but she should not ask us to reverse the manifesto by endorsing the right of some hereditary peers to elect each other. I also beg the Government not to ask us to endorse the principle of appointment. Both those proposals are an absolute denial of the democratic principle on which this House is based and on which the second House should also be based.

5.20 pm

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): The right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), in his ever-useful radicalism, showed only one piece of naivete. That was in his belief that the House of Commons might at some stage cease to be influenced by patronage. I do not know what composition the House of Commons would need before the right hon. Gentleman's idealistic view about its immunity to the delights of office might prevail on it to oppose the Executive arm of government. What is certain is that he shows a degree of realism in his regard for the prime ministerial power, and I share whole-heartedly his regrets about the development of unchecked presidentialism. I shall have something to say about that later in my remarks.

However, I shall begin by dealing with the Bill. As the Leader of the House said, it is a free-standing reform, worthy of consideration on its own merits, and I shall do it that justice. I must admit at the outset that I could not possibly emulate the right hon. Lady's lip-smacking relish in pronouncing the demise of the hereditary peers. I am not sure that it would be entirely seemly for me to try, although I enjoyed her performance and even the astringency with which she expressed her expectations.

I certainly like the Bill's directness. The language of clause 1 has an historic, almost beautiful clarity. It states:

"No-one shall be a member of the House of Lords by virtue of a hereditary peerage."

That, it seems to me, is the appropriate full stop to a passage of this country's history which, as the right hon. Member for Chesterfield reminded us, is, from the standpoint of the millennium, of comparatively recent date.

Mr. Benn: Of course, the clause will also knock out Lord Whitelaw, who sits in the House of Lords by virtue of a hereditary peerage but who is the first peer created with that name. Presumably there will have to be an amendment to allow him to stay: I do not know whether the Government have given any thought to that, but I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will bear it in mind.

Mr. Maclennan: That sounds to me like a Committee point.

In a modern democracy, the participation in the work of Parliament of hereditary peers is an anomaly that is not merely theoretically indefensible. The hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) has shown rather scant regard for the deliberations of this House in withdrawing so early from the debate. He was unwilling to allow me to intervene in his speech, and evidently now is unwilling to listen to my speech—an example of the courtesy that one has come to expect from new Conservatives. The hon. Gentleman's answer to the question posed by the hon. Member for Corby (Mr. Hope) about whether the modern Conservative party believed in the hereditary principle was equivocal, to say the least. He answered it with a double negative, saying that the hereditary principle was not something that the Conservative party would challenge.

By simple extension, that must be regarded as a straightforward endorsement of the hereditary principle, which baffled a few who were listening. I do not know what audience the hon. Gentleman addresses when he endorses the hereditary principle, but I think that it is the most indefensible of our historical relics.

Sir Patrick Cormack *rose—*

Mr. Maclennan: I give way to the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack). [*Laughter.*]

Sir Patrick Cormack: I am grateful to the antediluvian right hon. Gentleman. What my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) was making clear, and simply so, was that in monarchy, the hereditary principle is supported not only on the Conservative Benches. Labour Members also support that principle, because everyone who supports the retention of a monarchy must support the hereditary principle.

Mr. Maclennan: The hon. Member for Woodspring was asked to give his view on the hereditary principle in the context of the House of Commons and the House of Lords. He did not choose to take refuge in the kind of evasion offered by the hon. Member for South Staffordshire.

The hon. Member for Woodspring also expressed a remarkable turnabout in the Conservative party's view: Conservatives used to think that the beauties of the British constitution were its capability of evolution and the step-by-step incrementalism that had enabled it to adapt uniquely and differently from the bouleversements that

characterised continental European and other constitutions that had changed only by revolution. Tonight, the hon. Gentleman, speaking for the Conservative party, has offered the view that that is all for the past, and that the only way in which to approach modernisation of the House of Lords is through total reform of Parliament.

The hon. Gentleman went much wider than reform of the Commons by talking about the role of judges in our legislature, and about a vast range of other matters. He said that we could reform the House of Lords only if we had a new, written constitution. If that is what the hon. Gentleman meant, I am prepared to listen seriously to him, particularly if he produces a draft for our consideration.

The Liberal Democrats have, of course, already done that: we have a coherent view of our goal, but we are not so unrealistic as to believe that we could introduce it in this Session of Parliament or the next and command the support of the House or of the British public. Incrementalism is how we have reformed our constitution, and it remains the way in which we must reform our constitution if we are to have any success in bringing it up to date.

The theoretically indefensible nature of the House of Lords must be borne in mind when one views the Bill. In addition, the present House of Lords is a practical obstacle to the effective use of the second chamber to complement the work of the House of Commons. The right hon. Member for Bristol, South-East—

Mr. Benn: Chesterfield, now.

Mr. Maclennan: I apologise to the right hon. Member for Chesterfield. I still think of him as he was when he played a part that I did not have the honour to witness, but of which I have read, in the reform of the House of Lords. It is that part for which he may well turn out to be remembered by posterity.

What I am trying to pray in aid is the possibility that the upper House could valuably complement the work of the House of Commons in overseeing the work of the Executive. That would tackle the issue of the prerogative powers to which the right hon. Gentleman drew attention, and to which I shall return.

The fact that the majority of members of the House of Lords sit there by accident deprives that House of any claim to have its views deferred to by those who exercise public power on behalf of Britain's citizens. However informed may be the views expressed in the other place, those who owe their participation in decision making to election are entitled to disregard those views in reaching their decisions. The involvement of hereditary peers diminishes the democratic authority of Parliament as a whole when it questions and oversees the business of government and when it holds the Government to account. As those functions are the very business of Parliament, the hereditary peers must go.

Hereditary peers are about as independent of party as I am. I shall not repeat the illustrative figures that the Leader of the House properly gave the House, but she did not specifically mention the 200 or so hereditary Cross Benchers. We will not find independence in their ranks either. When Labour has been in power, the Lords have defeated the Government an average of 60 times per Session, while Conservative Governments have been defeated an average of only 13 times per Session. Those numbers have the familiar whiff of partisanship. Hereditary peers are not independent. They are Conservatives, either in or out of the closet.

The Liberal Democrats welcome this first reform because we know that it is only the first of several. Some people—they have a respectable argument—would follow the footsteps of the great Tom Paine, dispense with the second Chamber and rely solely on the elected House of Commons. There are others—perhaps there are more in this House—who would keep the second Chamber only so long as it does not trespass on the turf of the House of Commons. Neither group has grasped the potential value in a modern democracy of a legitimate second Chamber, one that owes its legitimacy to election. Such a Chamber need not diminish the primacy of the House of Commons by usurping the roles currently exercised by this House.

A legitimate elected second Chamber could amplify the work of Parliament by drawing to itself tasks not presently performed, or not effectively performed. I again invoke the support of the right hon. Member for Chesterfield for that concept. Although this House works hard on legislation and oversight of Government, there are substantial areas of public business that we do not effectively consider. The powers of Ministers that derive from the Crown prerogative are not under systematic scrutiny. In a modern constitutional democracy, that is not acceptable.

Let me instance two examples. The power of public appointment has become ever more important, particularly with the establishment of executive agencies that spend huge sums of public money. There is no systematic oversight by Parliament or any requirement for advice and consent to appointments. We remember how the former Conservative Home Secretary asked Parliament to accept as head of the Prison Service a man whose background was not in the service. Shortly thereafter, when they had had a slight tiff and he wished to cover up his own responsibilities, he invited us to accept the man's dismissal. Parliament never considered the appointment or, properly, the dismissal. When great offices are given such responsibilities for effectively running our country, the time has come for Parliament to play a part in their oversight. That function would be suitable for a properly elected second Chamber. If it were to exercise such a role, this House would not be in any sense diminished, for we have never had such a power; if we have, it has never been effectively recognised or acted upon.

My second example of the exercise of prerogative power is the power to make treaties. This House has a limited part. It may be called upon ex post facto to approve them or to legislate to give effect to our international undertakings, but there is no constitutional requirement for prior scrutiny, still less for hearings before advice and consent is given. This is a matter of growing importance to our democracy because policy agreements with other countries increasingly condition the lives our citizens. That role, too, could be exercised by a legitimate upper House without detracting from the exercise of functions by the House of Commons.

Hon. Members, especially those who represent Scottish or Welsh constituencies, should remember that as decision making is devolved to the nations and regions of the United Kingdom, it is important that the interests of those nations and regions are understood and directly

[Mr. Maclennan]

represented here in the United Kingdom Parliament. A properly elected upper House could reflect the constituencies of the nations and regions of the United Kingdom. That would help to secure the unity and sense of purpose of our country.

Because the upper House could have an enhanced role without diminishing the House of Commons, I welcome this Bill as an important step forward in adapting our constitution to meet present requirements. There have been criticisms that the measure is too limited and fails to spell out the ultimate shape or function of an effective second Chamber. The Conservative spokesman, the hon. Member for Woodspring, echoed those criticisms this afternoon. However, I do not agree.

The decision to proceed to reform the House of Lords in two or more stages seems to be a sensible recognition of the problems that beset and foiled earlier attempts at reform. It also recognises that the removal of the anomaly of hereditary peers is a stand-alone reform for which the Government have a clear and unmistakeable mandate. I think that the views of the public are important in determining how the upper House of Parliament should be reformed.

The decision also recognises that, in reaching conclusions about the shape and functions of the reformed second Chamber, the public and Parliament should be consulted. The public's voice will be heard in the first place through the workings of the royal commission, whose appointment the Government have announced. Parliament will be able to express its views through the activities of the Joint Committee, which the Government have reaffirmed that they intend to appoint following the report of the royal commission. That is a very proper way in which to proceed under our incremental system.

As far as the composition and functions of the House of Lords in the first stage of reform are concerned, my right hon. and hon. Friends and I are content with the proposals set out in the Government's White Paper. After all, it is merely an interim phase and the Government have signalled their intention to move to the next stage as quickly as possible by asking the royal commission to report by the end of the year. That does not seem to conform with the actions of a Government determined to kick into the long grass a reform of such massive importance. The Government have asked the royal commission to come to a conclusion about matters of great importance with unprecedented urgency and speed.

The Government point out properly in the White Paper that they are seeking an analysis of the issues and not an accumulation of the views that may be found by grazing around the university campuses of this country. There is a clear need to pool the information systematically and present thought-out proposals that will commend themselves to the people of this country and to Parliament.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): Will the right hon. Gentleman explain why he thinks—I am interested to hear his speculations—the Government did not set up the royal commission 20 months ago?

Mr. Maclennan: When they came to office, Labour established a vast—indeed, an unprecedented—programme of constitutional reform. Some 11 Bills were introduced and enacted in the last Session of Parliament, and the Government should be commended for moving on those fronts with unparalleled speed. The relevance of that to the House of Lords draws upon the arguments of the hon. Member for Woodspring. In the second phase of reform of the upper House, it will be necessary to take account of the will of Parliament as expressed in giving effect to the devolution measures that were enacted in the first Session. I believe that it would have been premature to have announced the royal commission prior to the enactment of those measures. However, I welcome strongly its appointment today and look forward to the announcement of the remaining members of the commission.

As to the interim proposals, I welcome particularly the Government's proposition that the transitional House should involve proportional creations by the Liberal Democrats and other parties. That is also a reflection of Labour's undertaking given prior to the election and included not only in its manifesto but in an agreement entered into between the Liberal Democrats and the Labour party in the committee chaired by the right hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook) and by me.

I also welcome the Government's continuing view that party appointees as life peers should more accurately reflect the proportion of votes cast at the previous general election. In seeking only parity of numbers, the Government are making it plain that it is not their intention to swamp the upper House with cronies of the Prime Minister, or of anyone else.

I am pleased that, in the conclusion of the White Paper, the Government affirm that the process of reform is designed to give the House of Lords what is described as "a new legitimacy". In my view, such legitimacy requires a predominantly elected Chamber. Democracy is based on elections and to the extent that a legislature is comprised in some other way—however meritocratic it may be—its legitimacy is diminished. The Bill will help us enormously to advance toward that goal. If the Bill is enacted, a major constitutional objective—one that has baffled previous Labour Governments—will have been achieved. I strongly hope that the Bill enjoys the support of the House.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It will not have escaped the House's attention that a great many hon. Members want to contribute to the debate. If those who catch my eye bear in mind the needs of others and confine their remarks to a reasonably brief span, I shall be able to accommodate a great many more hon. Members than would otherwise be possible.

5.41 pm

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): I am glad to have an opportunity to speak in the debate and I shall certainly heed your instructions and be brief, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The Bill is important: it is part of the Labour Government's constitutional reforms to modernise and democratise the Government and to make democracy more relevant to the people of this country. It must be seen in the context of what we have done in Scotland and Wales, and of our establishment of the regional development agencies, which Labour Members hope will

soon become regional assemblies. We must also take into account the words of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister when he said, rightly, that we have to address the way in which the House of Commons functions. We are doing that through the work of the Modernisation Committee, on which I serve and whose work I want to continue.

It is absolutely right that the Bill would abolish the rights of hereditary Lords and that the reform is to be carried out in two stages. The problem has existed for a long time and it would constitute an unacceptable delay if we were to wait for stage 2 before abolishing those rights. In his attempts to oppose the Bill, the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) is defending the indefensible: in the present day, the hereditary principle as it is embodied in the House of Lords is unacceptable and has to be done away with.

People throughout the world find it incredible that, in 1999—on the edge of the 21st century and the next millennium—there are people whose right to sit and take a view on the government of our country is based on the actions of their ancestors many years ago; even though, as my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House pointed out, those actions were often not honourable. The reasons why many titles were established are, to say the least, quite dubious, yet the people holding those titles play a role in our government and had a hand in determining the poll tax and many other wrong and totally unacceptable measures. It is right that we should tackle their position, and that we should do so in the way the Government propose.

The review that is to take place has to cover, among many other things, the functions and composition of the upper House. Unlike my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), I do not think that, in proceeding in that way, the Government are seeking an unacceptable delay. It is right that reform should proceed in that way, because many factors have to be considered.

Let us take the example of the clergy: I am a member of the Church of England, but I think that the position of the clergy in the upper House is nonsensical. The upper House contains two archbishops, a number of bishops—Durham and so on—who are there because of their importance in mediaeval times, and several other bishops who sit in the upper House according to seniority. Bishops have several ways of entering the House of Lords, but if we argue that they should continue to have seats, it is nonsense that other religions should not have similar representation. That is one of the issues that must be considered.

The hon. Member for Woodspring talked about Cross Benchers as if they were independent. That is absolute nonsense, as anybody who has been in politics for a long time knows. I have been involved in politics for well over 40 years and I know that of those who claim to be independent or, when we knock at their door, say that the election is a secret ballot or that they do not know how they will vote, about 90 per cent. vote Conservative.

A few months ago, I was talking to someone in my constituency who remarked how terrible it had been when we had political bishops in Liverpool and Durham, in reference to Bishop Sheppard and the previous Bishop of Durham. I pointed out that a former Bishop of Burnley, Holderness, had been a staunch Conservative, and the person replied, "Yes, but that was not political. He was looking after the interests of the country." I am sure that Cross Benchers say that, but when they turn up, the majority of them vote Conservative. That is not in the interests of the country or of my constituents. It is time those peers had their places removed.

We want a second Chamber. I believe in a bicameral Parliament. As we move towards a new and better democracy, which the Government are trying to bring about, we need a second Chamber that is defensible. If, in the interim, an amendment in the second Chamber proposed that 91 hereditary peers should sit, I would accept that as long as it was clear that ultimately they would not have that right. That interim period is only to give us time to find out what the review says, to give the joint committee time to proceed and to give the House time to legislate.

The Bill is extremely welcome. The majority of people in the country believe that the second Chamber that we have at present is a nonsense and is indefensible. Let hereditary peers keep their titles; let them keep their heads; but for heaven's sake, get rid of their right to vote in today's Parliament. It is time for a change. It is time for hereditary peers to lose their vote in the other place and to gain a vote in parliamentary elections and the right to stand for election to this House if they want to have a voice in Parliament.

5.48 pm

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North-East Bedfordshire): I am grateful for the opportunity to make a short speech in this important debate.

The Bill, which purports to be radical and modernising is, I regret to say, a betrayal of Britain's great radical traditions. True radicalism does not just destroy; it preserves and recreates. The Leader of the House described the Bill as momentous. The Great Reform Act 1832 did not only do away with rotten boroughs but laid the foundations for what became, step by step in the 19th century, the basis of our modern democracy.

Sadly, the Bill merely destroys what has been an essential, practical part of the workings of our upper House over the centuries without making any proposals about what to put in its place. There is no excuse for that. The Government have had 18 years to think about these matters; they knew that they would introduce this reform and, frankly, either they have not thought about it or they have funked it.

Mr. Hope: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way. I put to him the same question that I asked the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox). Clause 1 states:

"No-one shall be a member of the House of Lords by virtue of a hereditary peerage."

Do the Opposition agree or disagree with that clause?

Sir Nicholas Lyell: The Opposition do not support the continuation of the hereditary principle in its present form. Speaking entirely personally, I think that one of the matters that the royal commission will want to consider—as the Government wisely want to consider, and I shall throw them a bouquet in a moment—is the possibility of some hereditary peers being allowed to continue at the election of their fellows.

[Sir Nicholas Lyell]

However, that is not Conservative policy—I speak from the Back Benches—and it is not Conservative policy to support the hereditary principle. What we demand is a one-stage reform, which is perfectly possible, whereby a sensible and carefully thought out proposal for the future is introduced at the same time as the aims of the Bill are implemented.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): Is not the essential point that an unreformed second Chamber could block proposals from this place?

Sir Nicholas Lyell: Possibly. I shall deal with that in a moment.

We Conservatives have never been against the genuine reform of the House of Lords. Conservatives have always been in favour of evolutionary reform. Indeed, as the Leader of the House will recognise, one of the ironies is that it was the radical but evolutionary Conservative reforms of Harold Macmillan's Peerage Act in 1963 that created the modern system of life peers, who look like forming the mainstay of the second Chamber, at least until a fully thought out reform is implemented.

Although I am deeply critical of the emptiness of the Bill—the right hon. Lady puffed herself up, I say with respect, by describing it as "exquisite simplicity"—I give the Government one cheer for seeming at last to listen, with regard to the setting up of the royal commission, even if that should have happened 18 or 20 months ago. It is a step forward which I welcome.

A further step forward, as far as it goes, is the Government's indication that they are minded to accept an amendment that will permit 90 or 91 existing hereditary peers to continue to play a role in the transitional upper House, pending proper reform. Why should that reprieve be so limited? Is it not a fact that the Government deeply need the constructive contribution made by so many hereditary peers of all parties, and that if the Government did not accept this reform, they would have to create a large number of the existing hereditary peers as life peers in order to continue the effective work of the upper House? In seeking genuine, evolutionary reform of the second Chamber, we should bear those points in mind.

Dr. Starkey: I am puzzled by the right hon. and learned Gentleman's use of the word "evolutionary". My understanding of evolution is that it involves change by a number of steps. Is not that exactly what the Government are proposing? Can he explain his understanding of evolution? Is it rather a "big bang" approach which the Conservatives seem to be suggesting?

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To give the hon. Lady a simple answer, she is proposing to wipe out fish. She might leave mammals and birds, but she is wiping out fish. She is not allowing fish to evolve. She is simply wiping out one portion of the practical workings of our Parliament, and that is not evolution. One can never carry analogies too far, but let her reflect on that.

Meanwhile, I shall give the Government a little more credit. I understand their desire to ensure some change. They are entitled to remind us, as the right hon. Lady did, that since 1911 many attempts at radical reform have foundered, just as they foundered a generation ago—not because of the opposition of the upper House, she should remember, but because they were caught between the hammer of Michael Foot and the anvil of Enoch Powell, in what seemed to be an unholy alliance to defeat any reform in the late 1960s.

Given the real role of so many hereditary peers of all parties and none, I suggest that it would be sufficient and wise in the interim to allow them to continue to play their part until proper reform is introduced.

I shall throw out a few thoughts about the role and composition of a properly reformed upper House. We are not dealing with a blank canvas. The Government may not have thought through their proposals, but a great deal of constructive thought has been given to the matter over the past 20 years, not least by some of us who entered the House in 1979, when 18 years of continuous Conservative rule were certainly not envisaged by me, and when the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) represented a real threat, with his proposals to alter the House of Lords. Likewise, some constructive proposals were offered by the committee chaired by Sir Alec Douglas-Home in the late 1970s.

The upper House is, first, a revising Chamber. For that, we need peers who are not there just for the kudos, but who are prepared to do the work and who in future, I suggest, may have to be paid something for doing so. Secondly, the upper House provides a check on the Government of the day, giving them the opportunity to think again, as the present Government recognise.

However, that understates the true function of the upper House. Our reforms must ensure that it continues to fulfil its primary function as a constitutional anchor, made up of a group of citizens of stature, independence and discretion, who carry the confidence of the country as a whole. If they say to the Government of the day, of whatever complexion, "Stop and think again", they must carry weight not just by their votes, but by their reputation.

How should Members of the upper House be selected in future? The Government's interim proposal is for an appointments commission, whose recommendations the Prime Minister will undertake not to veto. I sincerely warn against so-called independent appointments commissions. They are inevitably more quasi-autonomous than autonomous, and they are not answerable to Parliament.

If the Prime Minister's objective is to appear not to be appointing his cronies, such a commission may indeed seem to be helpful to him, but the danger is that by hiding behind such a commission, he will be divesting himself not of his power, which as Prime Minister will always remain very great, but of his responsibility and his answerability to this House.

In another, parallel respect, the Lord Chancellor, to his credit, has moved away from the idea—much floated before the general election—of such an independent commission for the appointment of judges. The Government should think very carefully indeed before allowing the Prime Minister to escape answerability on the vital matter of appointees to the House of Lords.

The greatest strength of our constitution is that almost every aspect of public life must in the end be answered for by a Minister or the Prime Minister, and thus effectively by the Government of the day. That is a real

sanction—for Governments, unlike so-called independent commissions, can be kicked out by the electorate. That is the democratic foundation of our constitution.

Mrs. Beckett: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is, perhaps, a little at cross-purposes with the White Paper. The independent commission, which will be appointed on Nolan principles in order to preserve its proper independence, will appoint the Cross-Bench peers. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will retain responsibility for appointing any Labour peers, and has undertaken not to exercise any veto over the names put forward by the leaders of other parties.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I am grateful for that clarification; I think that I understood it. My criticisms still carry weight.

Ultimately, the Prime Minister is responsible for the system as a whole. If it goes awry, he must be seen to be answerable for it. If it goes awry in a way that distorts our constitution, the Government of the day must not be seen to be hiding behind a so-called "independent" commission.

Mr. Peter Bradley (The Wrekin): I am at a loss to understand the right hon. and learned Gentleman. Is he saying that the independent commission should be independent of the Prime Minister or answerable to him?

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I do not believe in independent commissions. As my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) said, the Prime Minister will appoint the commission and members of the commission will enjoy being on it. They are inevitably under considerable indirect pressure to do roughly as they are told by the Prime Minister of the day. We should not put too much faith in independent commissions.

Part of the upper House may well be directly elected by the electorate. I have always favoured reforms that allow part of the upper House to be elected. It will be particularly important if hereditary peers are to be done away with altogether, because it will be a way of introducing new and younger blood to the upper House. As the Government's White Paper points out, one of the difficulties and ironies is that the average age of life peers is seven years greater than that of hereditary peers, notwithstanding the large number of hereditary peers and the fact that they presumably live to old age on exactly the same statistical basis as all the rest. If we are to get new and younger blood into the upper House, we must find a method of doing it. The idea of having a proportion of elected peers has merit.

Once elected, for whatever party, the elected peer should have a substantial period of office—at least six and perhaps nine years per election. He will have the authority of having been elected, but he must also be given a substantial measure of independence because an important feature of the upper House is that its Members, whatever their political persuasion, should be independent.

Dr. Starkey: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman clarify the fact that, although he refers to new peers as "he", he envisages that some might be women?

Sir Nicholas Lyell: Of course. The House knows well enough that when we talk about people who will be elected, they will be of either sex. It depends on who stands.

Members of the upper House will have the authority of having been elected, but it is vital that they have a substantial measure of independence. Only a proportion of those who are elected should be elected at the same time. I recommend a partially rolling Chamber of a third of elected members elected every two or three years so that there is no sudden change. When a Government are on the wane, Opposition Members may be elected to the upper House as time goes by; likewise, when a new Government are elected, they will not have a clean sheet and will have to sustain momentum if their elected Members are likely to form a majority in the upper House.

Independence and continuity are vital attributes if the upper House is to remain the constitutional anchor that has served us so well as over the centuries.

Although Conservatives welcome genuine moves towards reform, we have to oppose the Bill because it remains deeply wrong in principle to destroy without renewal. I not only sincerely believe that criticism myself, but in conversation with people of almost any party—including less dyed-in-the-wool supporters of the present Government—it seems to find widespread support.

In response to that criticism, the Government have at least made some moves towards speeding up the process of genuine reform and maintaining continuity with the upper House. I welcome those changes and ask the Government to think sincerely about extending them. For all the points that the Secretary of State made—they were very much jejune debating points, starting with the Earl of Dunmore flying from Tasmania, which I was amazed to see at the top of her list—it is clear that no Government have anything deep to fear from the House of Lords. In practice, Governments will be seriously defeated by the upper House only when they have lost the argument.

Constitutional matters are not the preserve of any one party, however large its majority. May I say to the Government's credit that if they continue to listen, there remains the opportunity of constructive reform? I hope that that is what will happen.

6.6 pm

Mr. Peter Temple-Morris (Leominster): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell). He and I have agreed on many issues in the past. Sadly, we are now on different sides of the House, but I can at least agree with much of what he said about phase two—eventual final reform of the House of Lords. I disagree with him, however, on the history of Conservative attitudes towards reform of the Lords. It is abundantly evident why reform should be carried out in two stages.

In some of the speeches that I have made in the Chamber since finding myself—very happily, I might add—on the Labour Benches, I have tried to relate the subject to the reasoning that led me here. One of my first speeches was on Europe and I have made several on Ireland. We are now discussing the constitutional agenda, and Lords reform is an important part of that. I therefore welcome the opportunity to speak on the first day's debate of this subject.

I have always been strongly in favour of reforming the House of Lords and abolishing the hereditary right to sit in that Chamber. In 1977, the first Temple-Morris effort to reform the Lords was made by way of a committee of the then Bow group, which I chaired, on Lords reform.

[Mr. Peter Temple-Morris]

It was called "secundus inter pares" and in the autumn of 1977 it made proposals not unlike many of the suggestions for phase two reforms that we are discussing today.

The proposals achieved a little publicity—they came out just before the Conservative party conference in Blackpool. When I duly went to Blackpool in October and was lingering innocently by a book stall, I heard the sound of marching feet behind me. To my horror, the then leader of the Conservative party was rapidly approaching. When she saw me she stopped, wheeled round and said abruptly, "Peter, I have read your pamphlet on the House of Lords." With that, she turned round and marched on. She did not say another word to me. I must confess that I never imagined that I had bright future under that leadership. If I needed confirmation of that in my early days in the House, I certainly got it then.

The traditional Conservative response to Lords reform has not changed this century. Lords reform has always been on the Conservative party's agenda. The party has been pragmatic about it and, on occasion, has made constructive proposals, but there has always been an element of compulsion. In that context, my former party's ideas are unchanged: basically, it would like to leave the House of Lords as it is because it likes the place. On the other hand, it is pragmatic because it has always realised, since the debates leading up to the Parliament Act 1911, that the House of Lords will probably have to change one day. I am trying not to score points but to present a factual argument. There is a dilemma, which is evident today: how much should people co-operate over something that they realise might have to change one day when they would like to leave it as it is?

Mr. Hope: My hon. Friend might be able to help me with the contradictory answers that I have received across the Chamber this afternoon. Based on his experience, can he clarify whether the Conservative party does or does not support the hereditary principle?

Mr. Temple-Morris: Judging by the election manifesto—on which, I have to say, I stood, although I was blissfully unaware of that particular element of it—it seems that we were elected on the basis of support for the hereditary principle. The party is not, with all respect, what I like to refer to as the old Conservative party. I have no doubt that, in those days, elements of it would have liked to reform the House of Lords. I believe that the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath) will address the House tomorrow and it will be particularly interesting to hear what he has to say.

Sir Patrick Cormack: I am most grateful to my former hon. Friend for giving way. Does not he remember that, in 1984, I introduced a Bill to reduce the number of hereditary peers to 200? He, and the Leader of the House, voted against it.

Mr. Temple-Morris: I do not like half-hearted reform. I have no doubt that I chose the right course of action by marching into the Lobby firmly to encourage my former hon. Friend to be slightly bolder in his efforts. I am very sad, because he now has a wonderful opportunity to make a constructive contribution.

The Government's approach has always been consensual. We could have achieved one-passage reform of the House of Lords only if my former party had taken a constructive view from the outset of this Parliament, when possibilities were being discussed. We could have put reform through in one measure, but it has been patently clear from the various perambulations of the Conservative party that—as in so many other things, I fear—it cannot quite make up its mind.

I want to get away from the present, to quote from the admirable report by Lord Home and to finish my point about the fact that the Conservative party's basic attitude has been unchanged throughout this century. The element of compulsion—the dilemma—began in the debates on the Parliament Act 1911. A footnote on page 30 of Lord Home's report quotes A. J. Balfour, no less. What he said is unchanged:

> "I dislike the whole thing. I would like to leave things as they are if we could. I don't believe you can make a better House. But that is not the question. The question is: can you make a Second Chamber strong enough to stand and resist assault? Can you make such changes as will enable our men to fight with success in Yorkshire, Lancashire and Scotland against single-chamber government? I don't think we can in our democratic days unless you admit an elective element".

That was way back in 1910. That comment is typical: once driven towards reform—because people cannot defend the indefensible—the party gets constructive.

It is inevitable that there will be reform in the end, but unfortunately, once the immediate threat of abolition—the sword of Damocles—and, in particular, the threat of a unicameral Parliament are withdrawn, the measure of co-operation drops—and drops at the first opportunity that the Conservative party has. I repeat that that is a major reason for the justification of the two-stage sequence for reform. We must concentrate on reform for the future; we must not spend hour after hour, day after day—and even Session after Session—arguing about the past.

That leads me to Lord Home's report, to which I want to refer in a little more detail. With all due deference to the private Member's Bill of my former hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack), it is a last major effort within the Conservative party at addressing reform of the House of Lords. The Conservative review committee's attempt at reform in 1978—which took place a year after my first attempt—is referred to in the White Paper, at page 49. The motivation for Lord Home's report was exactly the same—fear of abolition and fear of the possibility of a unicameral Parliament as part of the abolition—but it was clearly pro-reform and favoured a stronger and more legitimate second Chamber.

The quality of the report's findings mark it out as very worthy indeed. Sadly, however, the reaction of the then leader of the Conservative party—when Leader of the Opposition in 1977—to Lord Home's report and to my humble efforts, which argued for much the same thing as he argued for in his far more illustrious report; and her reaction to these efforts when in power, made it patently clear that, once the threat of reform of the House of Lords and the element of compulsion were no longer present, co-operation would be dropped.

Lord Home chaired the committee and its report is relevant to the debate and to the royal commission, and for the Government. It recommended a mixed House of Lords, part elected and part nominated; the abolition of

the hereditary right to sit; elections under regional proportional representation, particularly if the electoral system for the European Parliament went in that direction, as it now has, so that recommendation is still very much alive; salaried Members, called Lords of Parliament; and separation of the awarding and carrying of titles from the legislature.

The background was set out for possible reform, but that did not take place. The party remained pragmatic—at least in part, if not in the whole—because an essentially pragmatic act incurred the displeasure of the present Leader of the Opposition: directed at Lord Cranborne, who created what I refer to as the Cranborne arrangement.

I shall make specific points about the second stage of reform—for the royal commission, primarily, but also for the House to consider.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: The hon. Gentleman has pointed out, helpfully, how much constructive thought came from Conservative Members back in 1978. Does not that point up the message that I am trying to get across to the Government? Our complaint is not that there will be reform, but that there should be reform in a single stage, not in two stages. The Government have quite enough power to say, "Okay, if you haven't achieved reform in three years, we will have our way." With the presence of that sword of Damocles, is there not an opportunity to achieve constructive reform in a single stage?

Mr. Temple-Morris: If the right hon. and learned Gentleman was the Leader of the Opposition I would treat what he says with more credibility. I agree with the sentiment that he expresses, but the evidence was not present in the past and it is certainly not present in the activities of the current leadership and of Conservative Front-Bench spokesmen. Such evidence has never been present in this Parliament. The party cannot agree; indeed, that is self-evident from the right hon. and learned Gentleman's intervention.

Mr. Grieve: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Temple-Morris: Once more, then I must get on.

Mr. Grieve: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who, in any other context, I would also refer to as my friend.

I want to pick up a point that the hon. Gentleman made earlier, which ties in. There has been opposition from Conservative Members since the start of this Parliament, which makes, it is said, single-stage reform impossible. Surely, since the start of this Parliament, we have never been told by anyone—either through the setting up of a royal commission or the Government expressing a view—how the total package might look. Therefore we have never been able to comment on it, contribute to it or agree it.

Mr. Temple-Morris: That really is not good enough. The former Leader of the House of Lords was in constant conversation—often of a prandial nature—with the then leader of the Conservatives in the Lords. The two knew each other extremely well. Like many other hon. Members, I know both the people involved. It was made clear again and again that the Opposition could have a consensual approach. It was patently obvious that they did not want to take such an approach. Eventually, however, we had the Cranborne arrangement, which, I am afraid to say, we would not have had were it not for the compulsion of the moment. It was only when he was compelled to give in that he did so, and the Government reasonably accepted the arrangement.

I should like to make some specific points about the second stage of the reform. Like Lord Home, I believe that there should be a mixed House of Lords. That will almost certainly be the inevitable outcome of any reform. I suggest 70 per cent. elected and 30 per cent. non-elected. We should also consider having a third of members appointed, a third elected by proportional representation under a regional list, and a third elected by colleges of interest.

The proposal for some members to be elected by colleges of interest always crops up, but is usually dropped because it is considered to be too complicated to arrange and agree the colleges. However, the Irish Senate has such a system. The flaw in its system—with which I have had a lot to do—is not the colleges of interest but the electorate, because the electorate comprises Members of the Dail and members of local authorities. It is the most political electorate around, and that is why the Irish Senate is not what it was intended to be.

Bishops and Law Lords should not sit in the House of Lords. Bishops and representatives of other religious denominations could be colleges of interest in their own right. The Law Lords would continue to sit in the Privy Council. I am sure that, whatever we do, there will be too many lawyers in the upper House, so we do not need to send people there to exercise judicial office.

I can knock the question of dual mandates on the head. When we created the system for the first elections to the European Parliament, many people said that we must have dual mandates. Committees said how marvellous it would be for these lovely MEPs to come and tell us what was going on. When all bar one of those who achieved a dual mandate did not last more than one Parliament before, virtually to a man, they came back here, it rapidly became apparent that dual mandates would not work because MEPs had a lot to do. The Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Ireland Assembly will have plenty to do, but they could be colleges of interest to elect representatives to a reformed upper House. They could also be given a right of audience, as the European Parliament gives visiting Ministers. I see no reason for the second Chamber to be limited to its membership.

As for the style and title, the other place should be a separate body, as Lord Home recommended. If it keeps the name House of Lords, members could be referred to as Lord with their surname while in the Lords, and otherwise as MLs, just as we are referred to as MPs. That is a fair solution. It would be nice to keep the name House of Lords for romantic reasons, if for no other. I would not defend that point of view to the end, but the names House of Commons and House of Lords have a certain ring to them. We should not worry about the name, but rather devise a modern arrangement that we can live with in the next millennium.

6.23 pm

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): As the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) said, the problem that we face is the overweening power of

[Mr. Bowen Wells]

the Executive. It is to the reform of both Houses that we should address ourselves, and not merely to a minor reform of the House of Lords. The power of the Executive that the House has to endure is far too great—Labour Members are enduring it now, as Members on the Conservative Back Benches endured it for 18 years. This measure will enhance that Executive power, because it will add considerably—directly or indirectly—to the Prime Minister's powers of patronage.

Mr. Hope: The hon. Gentleman said that clause 1 is a minor reform of the House of Lords. Does his party support that clause, which states:

"No-one shall be a member of the House of Lords by virtue of a hereditary peerage"?

Does the hon. Gentleman support or oppose that clause?

Mr. Wells: I cannot speak for my party—I am not the spokesman on these issues—but I shall give the hon. Gentleman a direct answer. I agree with the statement in clause 1. I do not believe that membership of the upper House should be based on hereditary principles. In all his questions, the hon. Gentleman has failed to distinguish the difference between supporting the hereditary principle and deciding the membership of the House of Lords. I do not believe that it should be decided on the hereditary principle, and I hope that that is clear enough for the hon. Gentleman to understand.

Both Houses of Parliament have fallen in the public's esteem in the past 40 or 50 years. That should worry both Houses considerably, especially the House of Commons. It is essential to reform both the House of Lords and the House of Commons if we are to restore public respect for this vital instrument of democracy.

If we are to go down the path of reform, we should start with the traditional approach to which the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) alluded. We should call together all parties and peoples in the House—perhaps under the chairmanship of the Speaker, a Speaker's conference—to decide how reform should take place.

One of the first issues to consider would be the entitlement of hereditary peers to sit in the House of Lords. I said that that was not a major point, because if we abolished the hereditary principle, we would not change the constitution, except that we would put the House of Lords much more in the power of the serving Prime Minister, and would make it a party political machine supporting the Government in power.

What would happen after successive Prime Ministers had appointed their appointees to the House of Lords? Presumably, it would have a large number of members, unless there was a retirement provision or they were appointed for a set period. The consequences of the Government's proposal are not clear. We do not know what will happen at stage 2, what the royal commission will decide and what further legislation will be required.

What will happen once we have tinkered with the extraordinary system in the House of Lords? No one would have invented it: it is a crazy system. If we take one of the bricks from the wall, the whole thing will tumble down. That is why we must have a discussion on what we mean by reform and what we want from it.

I should like the House to consider carefully whether we should straightforwardly abolish the House of Lords and have no second Chamber. In the Commonwealth, the New Zealand Parliament abolished its second Chamber 40 years ago. It has proceeded comfortably and well without a second, revising Chamber. That may be the simplest solution for us all. If we did that, we would have to reform this place.

Dr. Starkey: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Wells: No, I want to keep to Mr. Deputy Speaker's time limit, so I cannot take the hon. Lady's intervention.

If we abolished the second Chamber completely, we would have the simplest solution of all; but it would require major reform of our proceedings in the House of Commons. Indeed, part of this process will involve reform of the House of Commons in any event. I shall be referring to some of the respects in which we must do a great deal better in future.

If, however, the House of Lords is to have an elected element—as suggested by both the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross and the hon. Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris)—it will gain democratic credibility, and will demand to be given power. It would, surely, be possible to allocate some powers to the House of Commons, and some to the second House. The second House, for example, could be given responsibility for many matters that are currently in the gift of the Crown—Crown privileges, particularly in respect of foreign affairs and treaties. That would accord with what happens in the United States Congress, which has considerable powers in that regard. As the House will know, it refused to agree to the treaty of Versailles after the first world war, which was, possibly, one of the reasons for the second world war. It interviews all those appointed to ambassadorial posts, and the Senate's approval is needed before such appointments are made.

Indeed, the question of appointments—which was raised by the right hon. Member for Chesterfield—is extremely important. The Executive has far too much power over appointments to quangos, and to other bodies that spend huge amounts of public money. Certainly, such appointments should not be allowed without parliamentary supervision.

Those, then, are powers that could be divided between the two Houses; but do hon. Members imagine that the House of Commons will give up the power over the Executive that it currently has? Had we passed a motion opposing the signing of the Maastricht treaty, for example, the Government would have had to retract their signature, or they would not have been able to continue to exist. My proposal therefore would mean this House giving up power to the new, elected House of Lords.

I do not believe that we shall get through the House of Commons any proposal that would empower the House of Lords—the upper House, the second Chamber or whatever we want to call it—to gainsay or second-guess the elected Chamber here. We would not secure that kind of reform, and that suggests that the best way forward may indeed be a single-Chamber Government. If we are to have a single-Chamber Government, we must take over, and call to account, the powers of Crown privilege and appointment held by the Executive; but we ought also to take powers to control the Government's power

to borrow. The House of Commons has never been able to do that, which over the years has got us into a huge amount of trouble economically. That has led to rampant inflation, mainly under Labour Governments.

We would also have to include European affairs when considering how to deal with a reformed House. Currently, we handle European affairs very badly, although we probably handle them better than most European Union Parliaments—with the exception of the Danish Parliament. I agree that Prime Ministers, and Ministers generally, should not go to the European Council and make agreements on our behalf without authorisation from the Parliaments that they represent. I think it monstrous, for example, that the monetary union proposals presented to the European Union were agreed by two leaders, President Mitterrand and Chancellor Kohl, with no reference to their parties, their Parliaments or their people. That, surely, is the kind of power that we should give reformed Houses of Parliament.

I feel that, when the European Scrutiny Committee and European Standing Committees A and B do not think that Ministers should go to Europe and agree, on behalf of this country, legislation passed by Europe, that should be binding on the Government. In such circumstances, this House of Parliament does not agree. It should have the power not to agree, and Ministers should have to withhold their agreement. I know that they will not like that, because they will not be able to wheel and deal. So be it—and so much the better for the supremacy of Parliament.

Scotland is to have a national Parliament, Northern Ireland and Wales are to have Assemblies, and presumably we shall eventually have regional government of some kind in England. We shall need representation of those powerful regional bodies in this place. That could be the basis of a second Chamber, but those bodies would also have to be represented, in some way, in this House. I am rather attracted to the proposal in the White Paper that we should find a place for a Committee—a Grand Committee, or a European Committee—that MEPs would not only be able to attend, but be expected to attend. They would have a duty to attend. It is important for us to understand increasingly what is going on in Europe, and to be able to influence MEPs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) referred to the power of the judiciary, which is becoming greater and greater under the judicial review procedure. Under the human rights measures that we have enacted, the judiciary is increasingly beginning to make the laws of this country, including administrative law. It is usurping the powers of Parliament and the House of Commons.

Another worry is caused by the fact that, on many occasions, we conduct our business in an absurdly childlike manner. Everyone is aware, from BBC radio and television, of the appalling spectacle that we present when we call the Prime Minister to account at Prime Minister's Question Time, which degrades the House and diminishes those who take part. We need to find an adult, sensible way in which we can hold our Prime Minister to account, with papers in front of us—hold him to account realistically and effectively. We must develop such techniques.

I consider that our Select Committees have been a success since 1979, and that we should give them more powers: greater powers to command debate on the Floor of the House, and, indeed, powers to bind the Government to abide by the results of debate here. That would truly empower the Select Committees, which do a great deal of work and generally achieve consensus in their recommendations. We should possibly establish a Grand Committee to bring the Prime Minister to account in an orderly manner. It could be televised, but, again, in a sensible and adult fashion.

We have a great deal of reform to consider, but the Bill constitutes a way of avoiding such consideration. It is a way of enabling the Executive to increase its power, and of reducing respect for the House. A proper, sensible attempt should be made to secure consensus among the parties. Contrary to what was said by the hon. Member for Leominster, that has never been on offer to the Conservative party, although I understand that it has been on offer to the Liberal Democrats. We need to consider all these issues in a proper, orderly, responsible manner.

6.39 pm

Mr. Robert N. Wareing (Liverpool, West Derby): I find it difficult to listen to some of the speeches from Conservative Members, with the exception of that of the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells), because they try to defend the indefensible. We have the spectacle of adversarial politics at its worst, because no one in the entire world could possibly defend the hereditary principle.

The Bill is not before time. Hereditary peers represent no one other than themselves. The whole principle is a denial of the basic democratic principle of equal citizenship. In 1701, Daniel Defoe put it succinctly when he said of the membership of the House of Lords:

> "Great families of yesterday we show,
>
> And lords whose parents were the Lord knows who."

Hereditary peers are responsible to no one, but they are overwhelmingly Tory politically; there can be no argument about that. They are partial in throwing their weight against Labour and Liberal Governments. After the Parliament Act 1911, two Bills of the Liberal Government—the Welsh Church Bill and the Home Rule Bill for Ireland—were thrown out by the House of Lords. I quote the playwright Tom Stoppard, who said that the House of Lords exercises

> "responsibility without power, the prerogative of the eunuch throughout the ages."

It is said that a second Chamber has three main functions: to delay hasty legislation, to act as a revising Chamber, and to ease the burdens on the House of Commons. The last function will be largely lifted as a result of devolution. I agree with the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford: I hope that devolution will include the English regions.

The White Paper says:

> "Britain needs a two-chamber legislature",

but does it? I question that. I agreed with an enormous amount of what the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford said about reform of the Houses of Parliament; I will not go over all that he said, but I found myself agreeing with much of it. I ask the Government to put before the royal commission an option that is not mentioned in the White Paper: not having a second Chamber at all.

[Mr. Robert N. Wareing]

Let us look at the possible composition of the second Chamber if it were elected. If it were elected simultaneously with the House of Commons, it would merely duplicate the membership of the House of Commons. People might say, "Elect it under a different system," but the arguments would then be about which system was the more democratic. However, if it were elected at different times from the House of Commons, doubts would be created about which was the more legitimate Chamber and the efficiency of the Executive would be reduced. Sometimes we may want to take that approach if we think that the Executive is too powerful, but having a second Chamber means taking Ministers away from more useful business.

If the second Chamber were purely nominated, it would lack the authority of a popular Chamber. It would be filled, irrespective of who the Prime Minister was, and the independent commission would not exist for ever, with placemen and women. If it were hostile to the Government, an indirectly elected Chamber could be destructive. If it were favourable to the Government, it would be superfluous.

One argument is—my hon. Friend the Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris) referred to it—that a second Chamber could be based on members of trades and professions, as a large section of the Irish Senate is. It could be, as they say, a House of experts, but is that really what we want? Do not forget that all those experts would be willing and able to talk on any subject in the House of Lords, senate, or whatever we like to call the second Chamber, irrespective of their experience.

If a person is elected to represent doctors, what weight could be given to the views that he or she expresses on, say, the euro? The House of Lords contains many notable lawyers. Lord Denning has been notable as a judge, but does that make his opinion on, say, the strategic defence review significant? Let us look at the function of the House of Lords.

Mr. Hawkins: I was interested in the hon. Gentleman's choice of example. Anyone who knows the family history of Lord Denning, whose 100th birthday we were all glad to celebrate recently, knows that one of his brothers was a general and another was an admiral, so he might have had quite a lot to say about the strategic defence review.

Mr. Wareing: Perhaps, but what Lord Denning has to say may not be significant.

Let us look at the question of delaying legislation. On the whole, legislation is not rushed. People talk about rushing legislation, but it is not rushed. Most of the important measures that have come before the House of Commons have emanated from ideas that have been debated over long periods.

Take, for example, devolution for Scotland. That has been argued about for decades. Some Scottish Members would probably argue that it has been debated ever since Culloden and that we are only just coming around to it. No one could say that that has been rushed.

When the nationalisation legislation was pushed through by the post-war Labour Government, it had been debated for decades. Even Winston Churchill had argued in 1909 for the nationalisation of the railways. It was not until 1947 that that came about.

I am pleased that the present Government are the first to legislate in favour of the minimum wage, but economists and others, including trade unionists, have argued and debated the whys and wherefores of the minimum wage for a very long period. I am sorry that we have had to wait until this Labour Government for it to make its way on to the statute book.

No one can say that that reform of the House of Lords has been rushed. It was debated after the 1909 Budget. We had the Parliament Act 1911. It took another seven years to get the Bryce report, with its complicated ideas for reform of the second Chamber. It was debated again in 1949 after the Tory Government held up the Bill to nationalise steel: the Parliament Bill was introduced in 1949 to reduce the delaying powers. Again, we had debates in 1968 about the reform of the House of Lords, which was scuppered largely—perhaps justifiably in view of the evidence at the time—by Michael Foot and Enoch Powell. We now have the debate yet again.

Legislation is not rushed. It is the length of time that has been taken to act on ideas, not hastiness in acting on them, that has frustrated our electors. They say, "Get on with it. If you believe in something, go ahead with the legislation."

We are told that we need a second Chamber to revise, but revision is not best done by a second Chamber that is composed in the ways that I have mentioned. Revision is best done—as the Government are doing—by consulting before legislation is introduced.

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): I quite agree with the hon. Gentleman that legislation is best introduced after consulting. It therefore seems perverse that he is supporting the House of Lords Bill just as a royal commission is being established to consult on it.

Mr. Wareing: I have already made it clear that it has taken the House a long time to reach the point of debating a Bill abolishing the legislative rights of hereditary peers. The idea of abolishing those rights is not new; it goes back an awfully long way. The hon. Gentleman himself has probably, at some time, belonged to a debating society that debated the hereditary principle. Nevertheless, this is the first occasion on which the House has considered legislation expressing a determination to abolish those rights—something that any rational person should have expected Parliament to do many, many years ago.

There are other ways in which the revisory process may be performed. Advisory bodies, for example, surround the Executive and could perform such a function. If there is a legislative problem—where revision is necessary because of a drafting problem—parliamentary counsel would be available to deal with it. Why do we have parliamentary counsel, if not to advise on drafting legislation?

If there is a failure of substance in legislation, the best way of dealing with it would be by establishing working commissions, comprising members of appropriate trades, professions or interests. Such a commission could be established to consider each Bill.

When the Labour party was in opposition, and Mrs. Thatcher's Government was introducing legislation—such as the Health and Medicines Bill in 1988—we, like other Oppositions before us, consulted the British Medical Association, the Royal College

of Nursing, trade unions and dentists' professional organisations. In future, such consultation could be performed in a much more formalised manner.

A dentist is not required in a second Chamber to debate foreign policy. However, in working commissions, dentists could debate parliamentary business, give advice and point out the difficulties and potholes on the pathway to legislation.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): They could also point out the cavities.

Mr. Wareing: I have known the right hon. Gentleman for many years, and I appreciate his sense of humour.

A second Chamber is not more likely than the first Chamber to reflect the popular will. Moreover, I suggest that it is not necessarily suitable—it is not suitable—for a revising Chamber to act efficiently, so that it assists the Government and advises the House of Commons. I was interested in the comments made by the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford on strengthening Select Committees. Although one could argue about how to strengthen them, doing so would certainly be a means of creating greater parliamentary control over the Executive, which I believe is necessary.

I make only one concession to those who argue in favour of a different type of second Chamber. A different Chamber may be required if the United Kingdom is to have a federal constitution—perhaps after we establish English regions, and after the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Ireland Assembly are well under way. Perhaps we will have to establish such a Chamber then, when so many of the important social services have been devolved to the assemblies.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest) *rose—*

Mr. Grieve: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Wareing: I shall give way to the hon. Lady, as I think that she asked first.

Mrs. Laing: Is not the hon. Gentleman arguing, most eloquently, for a total reform of Parliament itself? As he just said, we now have devolution and the opportunity—although Opposition Members do not want it—for regional assemblies. Does he therefore agree that, rather than debating the short Bill before us, which deals with only one aspect—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. As I have said before, an intervention is not an opportunity to make a speech.

Mr. Wareing: I shall answer the question of the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Mrs. Laing) with pleasure. I honestly believe that the Bill is necessary now. It is necessary if only to ensure that the Government—who were elected with a large majority, in 1997—have a reasonable chance of having their legislation passed in the other place.

I see no justification for maintaining the hereditary principle.

Mr. Grieve: I appreciate what the hon. Gentleman is saying—he wants the hereditary element in the House of Lords to go, regardless. However, in his very thoughtful speech, I should be very interested to hear his views on the timetable, after the Lords go, to deal with the issues that he is raising today. Those issues will not be dealt with.

Mr. Wareing: With respect to the hon. Gentleman, they are being dealt with. The Government have published a White Paper, which is there for us to read and to ask questions on. Today's debate will not be the only opportunity for us to raise the issues between now and publication of the royal commission's report, at the end of 1999.

If we move towards a federal Britain, my prescription—it is outlined in the White Paper; I shall not go into the details now—is typified by the Bundesrat, in the Federal Republic of Germany.

Currently—in this Bill—we have to deal with the House of Lords. I believe that the Lords spend enormous amounts of time in wasteful debate. Although the House of Lords deals with legislation, an occasional glance at its Annunciator shows that it is acting as a debating society. I have no argument with hereditary peers taking part in a debating society, but they do not have to use one of the Chambers of Parliament to do so.

The House of Lords ties up Ministers' time, which could be better used in other ways. *[Interruption.]* Ministers will admit that I do not often sympathise with them in the work that they do. However, the time that they spend answering questions in the House of Lords, and dealing in this place with amendments from the other place, could be better spent.

The House of Lords is able also to defy the electors.

Mr. Hawkins: Does the hon. Gentleman accept Opposition Members' view that, when Ministers are questioned in the Chamber of a House of Parliament, they are being held to account for the work that they do? Should not Ministers—the Executive—be held to account by Parliament? Is that not why we are here?

Mr. Wareing: Yes, they should be held to account. Ministers should be held to account by the elected Chamber—the House of Commons—and by Members of the elected Chamber serving on Select Committees. Moreover, I believe that the Prime Minister should have to attend Select Committees if called upon to do so. Ex-Prime Ministers should also have to attend when called. Baroness Thatcher refused to attend the Foreign Affairs Committee in the previous Parliament when we were debating the scandal of the Pergau dam. The Prime Minister should be called to account.

The late Baroness Stocks once described the House of Lords as a perfect eventide home. It is time to recommend its closure.

7 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): The difficulty for the Conservatives is that few of us would start from here. That is always a problem in such debates. It is clear from what a lot of what my right hon. and hon. Friends have already said that we would not have abolished the existing House of Lords because we believe that it performs a useful and robustly independent legislative role. Neither would we have set up devolved Assemblies and Parliaments in Scotland and Wales, and

[Mr. Eric Forth]

perhaps in Northern Ireland. However, we have to face the reality that such developments are occurring. In Scotland and Wales, they are well under way and we now have the Government's proposals for the House of Lords. We have to react to what the Government are doing and produce our ideas in the light of that.

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): How fiercely independent does the right hon. Gentleman believe that the House of Lords is when 50 per cent. of all Divisions in the Lords during the life of the previous Labour Government resulted in defeat for the Government, whereas during the 18 years of Tory rule, only about 5 per cent. of House of Lords Divisions resulted in Government defeats?

Mr. Forth: That might suggest that our legislation was better than Labour's. The hon. Gentleman has a point, but the fact that the bulk of the upper House has been hereditary has, in a peculiar way, made it independent by definition. Life peers certainly cannot be said to be independent.

Mr. Hope: Half the hereditary peers in the House of Lords take the Conservative Whip, which hardly makes them independent. I should like the right hon. Gentleman to answer a question that I have asked other Conservatives: does he support clause 1, which abolishes the hereditary principle? What is the Conservative party's position on the Bill?

Mr. Forth: I support clause 1. I am going to give my views in a moment, but first I should like to set the scene by quoting myself, which I always find pleasurable and productive. On 20 January—this is quite recent, so it is fresh in my memory—I asked the Leader of the House:

"As the main criticisms that the Government are making of the House of Lords appear to be that it is undemocratic, unrepresentative and unaccountable, can the Leader of the House guarantee that at the end of the process, the second Chamber will emerge as democratic, representative and accountable?"

To my delight and pleasure, the right hon. Lady answered:

"The right hon. Gentleman identifies our case accurately. The House of Lords is uniquely undemocratic, unrepresentative and unaccountable."—[*Official Report*, 20 January 1999; Vol. 323, c. 919.]

There is a surprising amount of common ground on which I would like to build. That is a useful starting point, which goes some way towards answering the question of the hon. Member for Corby (Mr. Hope).

We already have the beginnings of the process of devolved representation and legislation in the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. The process of change of the upper House is already well under way. I regret that I have to disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) and the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Mr. Wareing), who advocated a single Chamber. I have taken it as axiomatic that a legislature should have two Chambers for checks and balances and revisionary purposes. I am uneasy about a unicameral approach, even though our friends in New Zealand have gone down that path. We know that they have bitterly regretted some recent developments, so I am not sure that we should regard what they do as a good example.

Mr. Grieve: Does my right hon. Friend agree that a key issue is the size of the country concerned? A unicameral system may work well in a small country such as Denmark or New Zealand, but applying the principle to a country of 60 million people is a different matter.

Mr. Forth: That is a powerful point that we would do well to bear in mind.

We are faced with the reality of devolution and the perceived need—now broadly accepted—to change the nature of the upper House. Picking up on what the hon. Member for West Derby said, I have become an advocate of an English Parliament in response to the system that the Government have set up in Scotland and Wales. Just over a year ago, we embarked on the argument that, in fairness and for good administrative and legislative purposes, it is proper that the English people should be asked what they want, which has not yet happened. If they agree, they should be given their own legislature. That would answer the West Lothian question and would render regional assemblies inappropriate and unnecessary.

If we accept that that is a legitimate approach—I realise that not everyone does—it is easy and essential to move on and look at the role and functions of what would then be a federal Parliament, when the English, Scots, Welsh and Northern Irish were dealing with their domestic affairs through their new elected and accountable Assemblies. That would necessarily lead to a dramatically reduced House of Commons, dealing with foreign affairs, defence and overall economic matters.

To complement that, we should have a revised upper House consisting of 87 elected members. I do not pick the number 87 out of thin air. That is the current number of European constituencies. There would be no need for a lengthy and complicated study by the boundary commission. We have a ready-made electoral map on which an elected upper Chamber could be based. We could have multiples of 87, but I would feel comfortable with 87. The members should be elected for six-year terms, with one third of them being elected every two years. That would give the second Chamber a separate political legitimacy from the House of Commons. It would also allow the electorate the opportunity to express a view during the term of a Government, which would be a useful and necessary political device.

I accept that this is new political territory, but the Government have set in train a process that gives us not only the opportunity, but the obligation to look seriously at the way in which our country is run and our legislation is developed. What I have said may be somewhat radical, but this is the opportunity for a radical approach. The Government have already been radical with their measures for Scotland. They are already denying the people of England the say that they should have in all this. They are asking us to review the role, functions and nature of the upper Chamber, which surely also involves considering what the House of Commons does.

If we are considering a different sort of representation at English, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish level, and a different kind of upper Chamber, accepting—however reluctantly—that the basis on which the House of Lords

has operated for 1,000 years can no longer continue, surely the Government and the royal commission will accept that this is an opportunity to look in the round at how we govern and legislate, and to review our accountability and representativeness. I do not accept that a unicameral approach would give such legitimacy. I have no fear, as a member of this House for the time being, that a new, powerful, differently accountable and representative upper Chamber would necessarily pose a threat to the House of Commons. It should complement what the House of Commons does and its accountability. I believe that a self-confident Government should have no fear of a new-style, legitimate, elected and accountable upper Chamber—something that surely flows from what the Leader of the House said a few days ago.

Finally, I must accept that we would need a supreme court of the kind that the United States has. I believe that the Supreme Court has served the US extraordinarily well and has, on occasion, been radically and robustly independent from both the Executive and the legislature in the US. Again, we would have nothing to fear from that. Indeed, some recent and somewhat regrettable events have demonstrated that our own supreme judiciary is nothing of which we need be desperately proud—it has its faults and failings. I would have thought that something akin to the US Supreme Court would be a necessary adjunct to an elected upper Chamber.

We must take the opportunity given to us by the Government—largely by accident—to look properly and in the round at what we are doing about our government and our legislative procedures. I hope that we do that radically and responsibly, and give ourselves and our people a properly thought-through, balanced and functioning system of legislation.

7.11 pm

Mr. Clive Soley (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush): If the Conservative party follows the views of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), it will end up as an English nationalist party—which would be a sad end for a once-great party.

The main message that I have taken from Conservative speeches today—particularly that of the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox)—is that the Conservative party intends to go into the next general election as the only party in Britain which supports the right of hereditary peers, wherever they may live in the world, to vote in our legislature.

Mr. Letwin: That is not true.

Mr. Soley: I invite the hon. Gentleman to say categorically and unequivocally that the Conservative party will oppose the right of hereditary peers to vote in the House of Lords.

Mr. Letwin: I am most interested in the hon. Gentleman's observation—I cannot for the life of me imagine how he got that idea. Does he agree that the Government are proposing, and will accept, that hereditary peers should continue in the House of Lords?

Mr. Soley: No. The proposal is clear. For a limited period, 10 per cent. will continue to have the right to vote. I asked the hon. Gentleman a question that he has not answered. Does the Conservative party intend to oppose the right of hereditary peers to vote in the House of Lords—yes or no?

Mr. Letwin: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that in order to do that, the Conservative party would have to vote against an amendment to keep hereditary peers that the Government would be supporting?

Mr. Soley: This is no time for wriggling. Is the Conservative party in favour of hereditary peers having a vote in the House of Lords, as a second Chamber, in the future? The hon. Gentleman's co-defendant on the Front Bench—*[Laughter.]* The hon. Gentleman's supporter on the Front Bench, rather—the hon. Member for Woodspring—avoided that question.

As the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst said a few moments ago, the Conservatives say that they would not have started from here. The point is that we are starting from here because this is where the previous Government left us; it is, therefore, difficult to start from anywhere else. It is simple to express whether one thinks that hereditary peers should have the right to vote in the House of Lords. I will give the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) one last chance to answer that question, yes or no. The people of Britain have a right to know, and they need to know soon.

Mr. Letwin: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me one last chance, although it took him rather a long time to do so. Will he accept this perfectly clear statement from the Opposition; that there is not a chance in hell of the Opposition proposing the resurrection of more hereditary peers than will already have been put in that House by the Government? In the second phase—if the Government allow a second phase—the Opposition would not dream of proposing the hereditary principle as a way forward. Is that clear enough for the hon. Gentleman?

Mr. Soley: No, it is not. The question that the hon. Gentleman has to answer is this; if the hon. Gentleman was a Minister in a Tory Government, would he be proposing the abolition of the right of hereditary peers to vote in the House of Lords? The answer, as we all know, is a resounding no. It is a resounding no because the hereditary peers have given the Tory party a built-in majority for more years than many of us care to remember.

I enjoyed the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), as I always do—not least because of his historical grasp. However, he gave one or two examples that must be dealt with. He referred to a US-type system. I have never thought of my right hon. Friend as the greatest supporter of the US system, and there is a lot that is wrong with the US constitution.

My right hon. Friend suggested that it was a good thing that the Senate and the Republicans could hold the President over a barrel, as they are doing now. However, that is not a good example of why we should have an elected second Chamber—it is a profoundly bad one. Everyone knows that the battle in which the President is engaged in the US has nothing to do with the political, economic or social problems facing the US. It has everything to do with the fact that the Republican party could not beat a Democratic President on two occasions and seeks to remove him from office because it cannot win.

[Mr. Soley]

A few weeks ago, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield gave the Levellers as another example. I am a great supporter of the Levellers, and, in some respects, that important part of history set the standards for democracy here and elsewhere. The problem with the Levellers was that because of the way in which they carried through their policy in a situation that was fraught with difficulties, we ended up with the only period of dictatorship that this country has ever known. Again, that is not a good example.

A far better example from our history concerns Britain's writing of large parts, if not most, of the constitution of what was then West Germany after the second world war. The reason we put into that constitution an indirectly elected part of the Chamber was precisely to stop a centralising Government taking power again. Hon. Members on both sides of the House who believe that the only democratic proposal is an elected second Chamber must be aware that there are profound dangers in that, as historical examples show.

My right hon. and hon. Friends who follow that line ought to take into account the fact that when Baroness Thatcher was Prime Minister, she had no hesitation in destroying local government when she did not think that she could win the elections. An elected second Chamber—particularly one elected at the same time as this House—would do exactly the same. In the German constitution, we built in the safeguard of an indirect part of the Chamber.

Mr. Cash: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the Bundesrat is, in fact, anything but independent, and furthermore that it is the biggest bunch of fat cats that has been seen this side of the Alamo?

Mr. Soley: The hon. Gentleman would do well to remember that the Bundesbank has been one of the most successful organisations in Europe. Local government has been represented on the board of the Bundesbank, which is why regional economic development in Germany has been much more successful than here.

I wish to refer to the speech of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House. We should have a sense of history in a debate such as this. I compliment my right hon. Friend on having the good fortune to be the person who modernises Britain's constitution by introducing this fundamental reform of the House of Lords. It is profoundly important, and it is right that in this debate, we do not lose our sense of historical perspective.

Mr. Brooke: For the benefit of those who are reading this debate centuries from now, it would be helpful if the hon. Gentleman knew that my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) referred to the Bundesrat, and that his answer was in the context of the Bundesbank.

Mr. Soley: If that is what he said, I entirely accept that. I answered in the context of the Bundesbank in my second example, because I thought that that is what the hon. Gentleman said. Either way, in the political and economic structure of West Germany—*[Laughter.]* Conservative Members may laugh, but we should take pride in the fact that we wrote that constitution and set up much of the economic structure. If we recognised what we did for the Germans, with their full co-operation, we might recognise that lessons could be learnt from what we did then. We do not necessarily need to go back to 1911 or the 1640s, because we have had a good record more recently.

Mr. Maclennan: I follow and to some extent support what the hon. Gentleman has said about our wisdom in respect of the German constitution. Does the hon. Gentleman support what we did to the voting system for West Germany?

Mr. Soley: Not necessarily. In local government, much can be said for a different type of voting system, but there are horses for courses.

The importance of our current proposals is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) said earlier, that we are trying to modernise the British constitution, not just in one area—the House of Lords—but through devolution to Scotland, Wales, London and, I hope, the English regions. I am confident that this Government will radically reform the British constitution.

The special tragedy of the Conservatives—their party used to take pride in the British constitution—is that they let it freeze in the 20th century and made no significant changes to it. They believed that it kept them in power, and to some extent it did. The one constitutional change they did make, they now tell us that they did not intend—I refer to the Single European Act, which removed some power from the House of Commons and made it indirectly controlled through the Council of Ministers.

Britain has the advantage of having an unwritten constitution, although some people disagree that that is an advantage. The right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) might prefer a written constitution. The advantage of an unwritten constitution is that it can continually evolve. The United States is having difficulty changing its written constitution as it now needs to. However, because we did not change our constitution in the 20th century, it has become redundant in many areas and is seen by many people as irrelevant to our needs.

The message about reform today is that it is necessary to deliver the right economic and social policies that the country needs. We are not doing this just for the sake of reform or even because the principle of hereditary voting is wrong. We are doing it because we need efficient, democratic government—and that means reform. That also means that we need the first stage reform, because that is where reform has been blocked in the past. Members on both sides of the House have referred to the failure of reform in the 1960s. That happened because people, including some Labour Members, fell for the Conservative argument that we had to change everything or nothing. That is a fatal mistake which we must not make now.

We want the first stage reform now. It has been argued that the Bill will lead to a neutered second Chamber, but the Conservatives will still have a majority. It is worth reminding the House of the long-term aims of the Government, which were spelt out in the White Paper:

"The legislative powers of the House of Lords will remain unaltered."

It also states:

"No one political party should seek a majority in the House of Lords."

That gives the lie to the argument that the Bill is an attempt to install a Labour majority in the House of Lords. We will not have a majority in the House of Lords once the Bill becomes law and we will not be able to create such a majority artificially, because of the independent appointments system. We will then move on to the second stage, and debate on the form it should take will continue. Now, we must focus on the first stage.

It is time to be brave and to recognise that reform of the House of Lords is essential. The hereditary principle is a nonsense. People talk about the hereditary vine, but my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield produced a phial of blood to show that the hereditary principle is not always entirely pure. Occasionally, as the nobles wandered the highways and byways of olde England, they spread their seed far and wide. That gives a new meaning to the phrase "genetically modified crops". I think that they should be labelled, but that is another issue. As my right hon. Friend said, the hereditary principle has been used as an advantage and switched on and off as necessary. It is no longer necessary and we must reform the House of Lords to achieve an efficient, democratic Government. We must have the first stage in order to move on properly to the debate about the second stage.

7.26 pm

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): Those of us who have sat through the debate so far will have realised that many of the more interesting contributions have crystallised what is wrong with the Bill. I am sure that it is widely agreed that constitutional Bills should be of particular interest to us all as parliamentarians. After all, if parliamentarians are not sensitive about parliamentary democracy, no one else will be. It behoves us, especially at a time when Parliament seems to be falling into public disrepute, to take any parliamentary reform seriously.

It is my contention that it is impossible for the conscientious parliamentarian, who wishes to see an effective second Chamber as a contribution to the democratic process, to support the Bill, because it leaves the future of that Chamber as a void. As we have heard in many of the contributions today, people have tried to fill the void by suggesting what the result of the reform process should be. That is an entirely legitimate debate that this House and the country should be having, but the Government have introduced the Bill before any sensible consultation process has started and they have got everything in the wrong order.

It is absurd to claim that any second Chamber would be better than the current one, as the Leader of the House did earlier. It is not possible to hold that position sensibly. The objection to the current second Chamber, which we have heard from Labour Members today, is that nobody should be able to vote in it by reason of heredity.

Mr. Hope *rose—*

Mr. Green: I shall save the hon. Gentleman the trouble. The answer to his question is yes. In order to vote for the Bill, one must believe that any replacement House of Lords would be better than the one we have. [HON. MEMBERS: "Yes."] It is interesting that Members on the Government Benches are chorusing yes. They are saying that if the Prime Minister of the day chose to appoint 500, 600 or 700 peers from his party to ram through legislation of which they disapproved—and they should remember that they will not always be in power—that second Chamber would be still better than the current House of Lords. If they believe that they are mad. They would be wrong and the proposition is anti-democratic. The Bill contains no guarantees that any of the promises given by the Prime Minister or the Leader of the House would be put into law, that Lord Wakeham's committee need listen to any of the proposals in the White Paper, or that the Joint Committee of the two Houses will be abolished. The Bill contains no safeguards to ensure that a new second Chamber is better than the existing one.

Dr. Ladyman: The hon. Gentleman is right: the hypothetical situation that he has described would be anti-democratic. However, does he honestly believe that it would be less democratic than the Conservative party's permanent 3:1 majority in the present House of Lords?

Mr. Green: Yes, it would be less democratic, as modern patronage, as opposed to old patronage, would be involved. [*Laughter.*] It certainly would not be better.

Labour Members are proof of that. They regard it as preferable for a modern Government to decide to subvert Parliament by using its majority in this House to destroy the revising power of the second Chamber. That is an interesting insight into new Labour. It shows that Labour Members do not have a democratic bone in their bodies. They do not accept what Parliament is for. They do not realise that any Parliament needs a revising function, which must have at its heart the ability to defeat the Government of the day. If they do not accept that, Labour Members ought to be unicameralists, but I think that they profess not to be.

Maria Eagle: When previous Bills have been introduced suggesting that the powers of the House of Lords should be changed, the Conservative party has always said, "Don't deal with the powers, deal with the composition." This Bill deals with the composition of the second Chamber, but now the hon. Gentleman says, "Don't deal with the composition, deal with the powers." Is not the hon. Gentleman really saying that he simply does not want the matter to be dealt with at all?

Mr. Green: No, I am not saying that. The hon. Lady is extremely effective at attacking the Conservative party of 1911, but she should either bring herself up to date or find a new intervention for the second day of this debate tomorrow.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): Will the hon. Gentleman enlighten the House about the Conservative party's attempts since 1911 to reform the other place?

Mr. Green: The most successful reform of the House of Lords this century was the introduction of life peerages. That was done by a Conservative Government, so the hon. Lady need not worry on that score.

Legitimate arguments can be held about the competence of the current hereditary peers and about the role and composition of the second Chamber. However, no case can be made for asking this House to change radically the composition of Parliament without any indication of how it will be composed at the end of

[Mr. Green]

the process. We could have a second Chamber with a majority appointed by one Prime Minister—the parliamentary equivalent of the South sea bubble, the worst kind of capitalism, when investors were invited to buy shares in a company whose purpose would be revealed later. The Government are asking us to have a House in Parliament whose composition and role will be revealed later. That is no way to reform Parliament.

Dr. Ladyman: I am glad to have been able to catch the hon. Gentleman before he proceeds too far down his line of argument. I have just realised what he has said. He contended that the introduction of life peers was the greatest reform of the House of Lords so far and added that it was done by the Conservative party. However, was not that exactly the power that he attacked as new patronage only a few minutes ago?

Mr. Green: No. I was attacking the possibility that the Prime Minister of the day could be allowed to abuse that patronage. The Labour party claims to be modernising the constitution, but in fact it is seeking to entrench that abuse—a process that is neither sensible nor democratic.

Labour Members should consider their individual positions, as they will vote on the Bill as individuals. I suspect that they would feel rather uncomfortable at being invited to vote for legislation on health, education or any of the vital issues if the Government introduced it by saying, "We are introducing a reform and we have no idea where it is going to end up." I suggest that they should feel even more uncomfortable about being asked to vote for constitutional reform, about which they have a responsibility as individual parliamentarians, and to take their vote seriously.

The point has been made that a huge popular demand exists for the abolition of the hereditary peerage. It does, but only one poll has been taken about the means that should be adopted. In answer to a question about whether hereditary peers should be abolished before other details of the reform are decided, 25 per cent. of people agreed that the peers should be abolished. However, when asked whether things should be left as they are at present until the details of the reforms are decided, 68 per cent. of people said that things should be left as they are. Although I accept that there is a huge popular mandate for getting rid of the hereditary peerage, the British people do not support the way in which the Government are going about it.

The Government have said already that they will accept an amendment that will drive a coach and horses through their protestations about how much they hate the hereditary peers. Earlier, the Leader of the House performed an extremely spirited Madame Defarge act when she expressed her deep hatred of hereditary peers. Therefore, it is slightly odd that the Government's first action is to reach for a compromise that will preserve 100 hereditary peers for the indefinite future. They object to the hereditaries so much that they will put them in what they describe as a transitional House and leave them there for as long as possible.

The Bill is therefore misnamed: it should be called the Abolition of Hereditary Peers (Apart from the Ones We Won't Abolish) Bill. That is what the Government are doing. The Bill is full of rhetoric about how unfit hereditary peers are to legislate on any matter at all. Nevertheless, the Government also appear to think that hereditary peers are uniquely able to legislate on the future of the peerage and the second Chamber.

The Government's position is completely incoherent. If the hereditary peers can legislate on those matters, they cannot be so unfit to legislate on other matters. If the Government do not believe their rhetoric—and the gap between words and actions is huge—no one else should.

The White Paper, I admit, offers hints about where we go next but it is not Whitehall's finest hour and does not illuminate the underlying issues as it should. The first problem with it has been touched on already by my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox). The Government constantly repeat the line that there is an inbuilt Conservative majority of 3:1 in the House of Lords. In fact, the tables in the White Paper give the lie to that assertion. My hon. Friend has mentioned the overall total, but I point out to Labour Members that, even though there are 627 hereditary peers in the House of Lords, only 300 are Conservatives. That is less than 50 per cent. of the total—hardly a 3:1 Conservative majority.

The Government derive the 3:1 figure by ignoring the Cross-Bench peers, about whom we have heard quite a lot of sneering in the debate. That is especially regrettable, as many of the Cross-Bench peers contribute to the debates of this Parliament a degree of non-partisan expertise that is one reason why the House of Lords is probably held in higher repute than the House of Commons at present. Labour Members should consider that point.

The second big problem with the White Paper is that reveals the Government's tendency to blackmail. On page 29, it states:

> "If there is consensus, the Government will make every effort to ensure that the second stage of reform has been approved by Parliament before the next election."

Sadly, the hon. Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris) is no longer present. He referred to the consensus that has been on offer from the Government all along. The consensus seems to be, "You agree with us, and we'll form a consensus."

Dr. Fox: On our terms.

Mr. Green: Precisely. Consensus has to be on the Government's terms: there is no possibility of any consensus on any other terms. I do not think that that is a sensible way to claim that a national consensus is being sought.

It is right that a Government should try to seek a national consensus on a constitutional reform such as this. One assumes that they want to set in train a process that will be permanent. They know as well as anyone else, that if they proceed on this partisan basis they will not achieve a permanent settlement. As a result, this country will be going through constitutional change for decades to come. Experience suggests that countries that have constant constitutional upheaval are not better governed in the long term.

There is no guarantee in the Bill that the safeguards mentioned in the White Paper will be maintained. Perhaps a Minister could give us such a guarantee that

the aspirations of the White Paper are in fact firm commitments. Similarly, the Bill contains no guarantee of a timetable. This matter should not drift on from Parliament to Parliament, and I seek some assurances from Ministers about the timetable.

The possible reduction of the powers of the House of Lords is another problem with the White Paper, which states on page 40 that there should be

"arrangements to give government Bills introduced first into the second chamber the same protection as those introduced first into the House of Commons, so removing an artificial constraint on the management of Parliamentary business".

The words "artificial restraint" are wonderful Whitehall weasel words: in other words, the Bill removes something that makes it slightly more difficult for the Government to put through their Bills.

That paragraph alone gives the lie to any suggestion that the reform is about democracy. It is about increasing the power of the Executive vis-a-vis Parliament. As such, it could be extremely dangerous.

Other clear weaknesses are not touched on by the White Paper. We cannot consider the composition of the House of Lords without considering its role. The Bill tends to increase the power of the Executive. The transitional house will, as the Bill stands, be worse than the existing House of Lords.

Much has been made of evolution, but the Bill is not evolution. Evolution is an inevitable process, but the Government's direction is not clear, meaning that the reform cannot be an inevitable process. They are not taking a sensible evolutionary approach to constitutional change.

The central problem of the Bill, however, is that it sets up a quango as part of our Parliament. The Bill contains no guarantee that the quango will not last the 88 years that the previous transitional arrangement lasted. The quango will be completely under the control of the Prime Minister of the day. That is not modernisation; it is playing blind man's bluff with the British constitution and with British democracy. Anyone who cares about the roles, powers and democratic function of both Houses of Parliament will oppose the Bill.

7.42 pm

Mr. James Plaskitt (Warwick and Leamington): I welcome the Bill, which deals swiftly and effectively with important unfinished business. One of the most amazing things about the reform is that it has not been done before. Attempts to deal with the hereditary peerage litter the century—in 1910 and 1911, in the 1920s, in the 1940s, and in the 1960s. One reason why those attempts failed is that many of them were one-shot attempts, a fact from which we have rightly learned.

The hereditaries have survived because of a combination of inertia, disagreement over alternative arrangements and the indifference of the Conservative party. I am proud that the Labour Government are beginning the process that will finish the job and give us a modernised Parliament appropriate to the 21st century.

The issue before us may not top the public's agenda, but it remains important. People want, and deserve, a more representative Parliament. The hereditary principle is clearly an anachronism that diminishes the credibility of the whole of Parliament. The current set-up also clearly frustrates the democratic will. The hereditary principle enshrined in our Parliament is clearly an absurdity.

Mr. Grieve: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Plaskitt: Not at this stage.

One key test that we can apply to the House of Lords is whether, if we were starting out from scratch, anyone would suggest that the hereditary principle should be enshrined in Parliament. It is inconceivable that anyone would suggest that. Would anyone come up with the idea of having an upper House of Parliament of about 1300 members, many of whom rarely turn up? A majority of the House of Lords have inherited their seats, and they lack any discernable merit or right to a voice in legislation. Would anyone come up with such a chronically unrepresentative Chamber as the current House of Lords, which contains 759 hereditary peers, of whom one is black, one is Asian and 14 are women. Half the 759 went to Eton.

The House of Lords remains basically an aristocracy. Long after the aristocracy lost its social influence and its economic power, it still holds political power. The Liberal Prime Minister Lloyd George was right:

"Aristocracy is like cheese—the older it is, the higher it becomes."

The House of Lords fails the "would you start from here?" test. It also fails the test on whether there is any reason for continuing with its uniqueness. No other Parliament in the world has a system like ours. No other country with an hereditary monarchy extends the principle into its legislature. No sound reason can be found for the institutionalisation of aristocracy.

There has, of course, always been one very unsound reason for continuation. The House of Lords serves, and always has served, the political interests of the Conservative party. The House of Lords is a Conservative House—with a very big C. Throughout the 20th century, the House of Lords has frustrated the will of non-Conservative Governments.

Mr. Grieve: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Plaskitt: Not at this stage.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris) mentioned Arthur Balfour. Balfour was quite blatant about the role of the Lords, saying in 1906:

"Whether in power or whether in Opposition, the great Unionist party should still control the destinies of this great empire."

That was almost 100 years ago, but the facts have continued to speak for themselves.

On average, the House of Lords defeats Tory Governments 13 times a Session. It defeats Labour Governments 63 times a Session. The current Government, with their massive popular mandate, had 33 defeats in their first Session, almost all of them attributable to the votes of hereditary peers, the Members of Parliament that the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), the Leader of the Opposition, described last year in his speech to the Centre for Policy Studies as: "the independent element".

[Mr. Plaskitt]

Just in case the first-born of our nobility should ever stray from their innate conservatism, Tory Governments have kept the other place topped up by appointing twice as many Conservative life peers as Opposition peers. There has always been a smile on the face of the ghost of Arthur Balfour. No wonder the Tory 1997 election guide said:

"It is important to defend the hereditary principle in its own right."

Mr. Martin Linton (Battersea): Does my hon. Friend accept that when Arthur Balfour said that the House of Lords was essential to the Conservative party, he meant, not only that it was essential to the party's dominance of Parliament, but, as he demonstrated in his 1905 resignation honours list, to the party's finances?

Mr. Plaskitt: That is true, and it is an interesting historical addition to the debate.

Mr. Green: Can the hon. Gentleman tell us how many of the Labour life peers created by the Government have contributed to Labour party coffers?

Mr. Plaskitt: That is irrelevant to our debate.

The Government are unquestionably right to finish the business in a series of quick steps. The process is set out in perfectly logical sequence: first, remove the hereditary element; then establish an interim House; then set up a fast-track royal commission. That sequence gives the prospect of a settled new structure, based on consensus and possibly in place before the next general election. It is the best way to finish the job with the minimum of disruption to the Government's important programme. Once all that is done, it will be easier for us to deliver effectively the agenda on which we were elected.

The Government have set down the right basic principles for the next important stage. The proposed reform will secure the pre-eminence of the House of Commons. There will be no permanent majority for any party in the second Chamber, a reduction in prime ministerial patronage, and a broad mix of interests. A more representative second Chamber will result. If we place partisan interests to one side, we can see that a logical, straightforward reform is being proposed. It seems that it is widely accepted by many peers. They are presumably privately amazed that they have got away with it for so long and are now, for the most part, placidly resigned to their fate.

It tells us much about the Conservative party in this place that this sensible, logical reform has caused such consternation in it. I suspect that most Conservatives are still in tune with the spirit of Arthur Balfour. His outrageous assertion of the right of the Tories to govern in perpetuity, regardless of the democratically expressed will of the electorate, still has its supporters here. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) has not come to this debate because in a pamphlet last year for the Conservative Policy Forum he gave the game away by saying:

"For Conservatives the constitution works."

For the people, it does not. It should, and when the Bill is enacted, it will.

7.51 pm

Mr. William Cash (Stone): It is fair to say that the present House of Lords and the hereditary principle are indefensible. That has been commonly accepted across the Floor today. I do not have quite the reservations of some of my hon. Friends about the manner of the Bill's introduction. I see no particular problem, given that the royal commission will be set up and the Government's majority means that they will get the Bill through one way or another.

We should concentrate on how best to address the remaining questions. I hope that the royal commission, in the short time available to it, will take evidence from as many people as possible and carefully consider the point that lies at the heart of the Bill: whether the proposals put the national interest ahead of party interest. When the ultimate provisions are revealed, that will be the acid test of whether the Government's policy matches up to my argument.

I have heard repeatedly that the House of Lords has in the past exercised its independent role and stood up for the nation. I have a searing instance in mind. Some 450 peers, mostly hereditary, were whipped in to defeat something that is now not only Conservative party policy but Government policy: the holding of a referendum on the European issue, in that case on the Maastricht treaty. The whipping in of people from all over the country was despicable and the result bore no relevance whatever to the national interest. I am glad that a referendum, after a tremendous fight by many of us, is now established as a principle of both the Government and the Opposition. I would not indulge too much in praise of the independence of the House of Lords as it has been.

I believe that a significant proportion of the House of Lords to come should be elected: in round figures, about two thirds or 75 per cent. There are problems with an elected second Chamber because there could be competition between two Chambers that claimed a direct mandate from the people. There are ways around that. There are people who could, and should, be nominated to the second Chamber for service to the nation. They have much to contribute and I see no objection to that in a second Chamber, provided that they are in a distinct minority.

Alarming statistics show that the people who have been appointed to the Lords—not always people with the merit that one might have expected, looking back over the generations—do not always attend. We attend our House. It would not be extraordinary if they were expected to attend rather more often than they do. If the reforms are to take place, they would emphatically be expected to attend. Figures in the White Paper show that, in 1997–98, only 40 per cent. of life peers attended two thirds of sittings and 34 per cent. attended less than one third. To say the least, any new nominated or appointed element would be expected to attend much more often than that.

The other way to avoid competition between a largely elected second Chamber and the House of Commons would be clear definition of functions. It is often said that the House of Commons has sole control over taxation. While I will not go into the constitutional ins and outs, there has been significant erosion of that principle, especially in relation to local government expenditure. If we want, as the Government claim to want, the House of Commons to be the pre-eminent Chamber, it should be

categorically stated that the Commons should be exclusively concerned with matters relating to taxation and borrowing, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) suggested. That is another fundamental question that would delineate the functions of this House and prevent competition if there were a largely elected element in the House of Lords.

As one who voted 47 times against the Maastricht treaty when it went through on a three-line Whip—something that I would do again several times if I had the opportunity—I am perhaps rash to suggest it, but there is far too much whipping in both Houses. If we want the House of Lords to have the independence that it deserves, its Standing Orders should restrict whipping, if there is to be any at all. If we want an independent second Chamber, as the Government claim to want, and we want this Chamber to be pre-eminent, there are ways and means to achieve it. One is to allow true independence and have a constitutional Chamber with the capacity, if necessary, to give this House a bloody nose. That should be on the basis of independence and democracy, not the hereditary principle, or the nominated cronyism that is the alternative.

The European dimension is, necessarily, part of the terms of reference of the royal commission. There is a role for the House of Lords. I have been a member of this House's Select Committee on European Legislation for nearly 15 years. This House performs a more useful role than many people suggest. In the House of Lords scrutiny process, Committees examine matters in a more considered manner than we are allowed to. Our Standing Orders should be changed to allow us to do that. I shall return to the point, which I have made in other debates, that there is a strong case, given the overarching character of the European legislative process, for a Joint Select Committee embodying the functions of the Lords and the Commons to represent the United Kingdom Parliament as a whole with respect to European legislation.

Without exploring the ins and outs of the issue, let me say that it is perfectly apparent to hon. Members that, increasingly and incessantly, power is being taken not only from this House but from Parliament as a whole. If we are to begin those reforms and engage constructively with respect to the European Union, we must consider the matter carefully. For example, the Court of Auditors report has just come before the European Select Committee. That matter should have been considered on the Floor of the House, but that has not happened. I believe that issues of that kind should be considered by not only the House but Parliament as a whole. Reform of the House of Lords should include a means of integrating the functions of both Houses in order to ensure that there is a proper democratic alternative to the views being expressed elsewhere in Europe that impinge upon our constituents.

In summary, we want the House to be pre-eminent, but it must also have proper regard to the functions of the House of Lords, which I believe should be largely elected. The two Houses must come together on the European issue and say that we are not prepared to be rail-roaded by legislation that is not in the interests of our constituents.

8.2 pm

Mr. Phil Hope (Corby): The reform of the House of Lords involves three major planks: removal of the right of hereditary peers to vote and sit in the House; reformed arrangements for nominations of life peers; and a royal commission to consider long-term reform. This Bill addresses the first of those three reforms in a disarmingly elegant one-line clause, which states:

"No-one shall be a member of the House of Lords by virtue of a hereditary peerage."

In replying to my interventions, every Opposition Back Bencher has stated clearly that he or she supports clause 1 and abolition of the hereditary principle. That makes the position of Conservative Front Benchers even more confusing, as they have steadfastly refused to clarify whether they support clause 1.

Last night, I watched the second instalment of a three-part drama called "The Scarlet Pimpernel", which is set at the time of the French revolution. It features a British aristocrat who undertakes daring rescues of French aristocrats during a rather more bloody 18th-century version of democratic modernisation. I was going to congratulate the BBC on screening the series at such an opportune moment, as we might draw some useful parallels. However, I think that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister makes an unlikely latterday Robespierre and my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House makes an even less likely Madame Le Guillotine.

That parallel was completely collapsed in this debate when it came to casting the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) as Sir Percy Blakeney, the Scarlet Pimpernel. The drama portrays that figure as a useless fop by day and an intelligent, resourceful rescuer by night. Regretfully, we appear to have seen only the hon. Gentleman's day-time persona in this Chamber. If the hereditary Lords are hoping that rescue will come from the Opposition, they will have to think again as convincing arguments to support their existence will, like the Pimpernel, remain ever elusive.

Mr. Peter Bradley: It was said of the Scarlet Pimpernel: "They seek him here, they seek him there, but cannot find him anywhere." Does my hon. Friend accept that the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) fulfils at least that characteristic?

Mr. Hope: I thank my hon. Friend for pointing that out. What is more, few Liberal Democrats have been present for the debate and we have sighted not a single member of the minority parties. I think that that fact is worth highlighting for the benefit of the wider public.

My research about peers in and around my constituency has revealed some interesting facts. There are six peers registered as living in Northamptonshire: three life peers and three hereditary peers. Interestingly, one might expect the Duke of Buccleuch to register as living in the county, as he owns half of it. However, he is registered in Scotland, because he owns half of that as well. The phrase "absentee landlord" has a particular resonance for those of us who live in Northamptonshire.

Hon. Members may be wondering where I gathered those facts. They can discover how many peers live in their constituencies by contacting their local electoral registry office, which publishes Lords reports about all members of the House of Lords who live in an area and cannot vote. That is interesting because clause 2—which has received no attention in the debate so far—gives hereditary peers the right to vote and to stand for election to the House of Commons. Under the Bill,

[Mr. Hope]

those hereditary peers registered as living in Northamptonshire could stand for election and earn the right to sit in Parliament, based on merit rather than accident of birth. I look forward to seeing the names of Earl Spencer, Lord Brassey of Apethorpe and Viscount Addison of Cotterstock on the ballot paper at the next general election—if they wish to retain their right to sit in Parliament.

The central question posed directly by the Bill—one that every Opposition Member has avoided debating—is: why keep the hereditary peers? What is the case for retaining the hereditary principle? Are the Opposition arguing to allow members of the House of Lords who are there by accident of birth to maintain their voting power because they are so representative of the country, because of their track record in promoting democratic rights or because they keep a balanced check on the powers of the House of Commons? Let us have a look. If the Opposition believe that the hereditary peers are representative of the country, it would be reasonable to expect to see something approaching a gender balance. However, of the 635 hereditary peers sitting in the House of Lords, only 16 are women and only two come from minority ethnic groups.

If the Opposition are arguing that the hereditary peers represent the country, we might expect to see them come from all walks of life. Yet 45 per cent. of hereditary peers went to one school: Eton. Some 60 per cent. of them describe themselves as "landowners or farmers" and, perhaps most revealingly, only 1.4 per cent. describe themselves as "workers".

Despite being completely out of touch with the real world, perhaps the Opposition can justify retaining the hereditary peers on the basis of their activities in the Lords. When in government, the Conservatives used the hereditary peers to force through deeply unpopular measures, such as the poll tax and rail privatisation. More recently, in the last parliamentary Session, they used the hereditary peers to oppose Government measures and to defeat the Government 33 times. Even worse, the House of Commons knows that, if certain measures—such as the legislation to ban fox hunting—were to be sent to the Lords while the hereditary peers were in place, the same land-owning Lords would abuse parliamentary procedure without a second thought and prevent the passage of any such Bills through Parliament and delay any legislation that accompanied them. Here we see the hereditary peers, who are unelected and unaccountable, in the worst light: frustrating the democratic process with unspoken threats, in the certain knowledge that they can hold the House of Commons to ransom. That is totally unacceptable.

Mrs. Laing: I agree that most hereditary peers are unaccountable—but they are also unaccountable to any political party because they were not put there by a political party. That is why the hon. Gentleman's argument falls. Although many hereditary peers support the Conservative party at any given time, they remain independent. Several hundred of them could decide tomorrow to support any other party. When we discussed this subject a few weeks ago, some of them did just that.

Mr. Hope: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. Someone once told me that members of the House of Lords sit independently, debate independently and then vote Conservative independently.

Despite their unrepresentative nature and their appalling track record, can the hereditary peerage be defended on the basis that it offers a balanced check on the House of Commons and the Executive? The problem here is the word "balanced". The figures have been well rehearsed in this Chamber: the Conservatives outnumber Labour in the House of Lords by three to one. In government, the Conservatives forced through unpopular measures relying on the support of the hereditary peers. In effect, the presence of the hereditary peerage means that, regardless of who wins the general election, the Tories stay in power in one House of Parliament. A Labour Government get only the legislation that the Conservative hereditary peers allow them to have.

Mr. Cash: I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman's script, but may I ask why the Government do not propose that the 91 hereditary peers be converted into life peers? Given everything that he has said and his repeated questions about the hereditary principle, why are the Government maintaining the notion that hereditary peers should remain?

Mr. Hope: I am addressing the central issue, the one that Conservative Members appear not to want to address. Why have hereditary peers? I have not yet heard a single argument from an Opposition Front-Bench spokesman to justify the Conservatives' opposition to hereditary peers' rights being abolished. I am looking forward to hearing the Opposition spokesman who winds up the debate explain, in detail, whether the Conservatives will support the hereditary principle.

The Conservatives cannot defend the hereditary principle, so they argue that we should take a big-bang approach, whereby we do everything at once, or nothing at all. To pick up the theme introduced by the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell), the Conservatives' position on reform appears to be that of saying that they would have some fish, but only if there were chips with it; they cannot have fish on its own. The Opposition's proposals make no sense, unless they are hungry for change.

The reform is long overdue. On occasion, we in this House are guilty of overstatement, but I can say fairly that the removal of the right of hereditary peers to vote is momentous and historic. There can be no better way of marking our march into the new millennium.

8.11 pm

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Being in the interesting position of following the hon. Member for Corby (Mr. Hope) enables me to deal with the question that he repeatedly asked of nearly every one of my hon. Friends who has spoken in the debate. To save him the trouble of intervening on me, let me tell him that he will be clear as to my answer once he has listened to my whole speech. From having looked him up, I see that the hon. Gentleman was, for several years before becoming a Member of Parliament, a secondary school teacher: may I suggest that, had a third former, as it used to be, or a pupil in year nine, as it now is, repeatedly asked a question in the same childish way as he has done this evening, he as a teacher would have become distinctly fed up with that child.

I would describe the hon. Gentleman's speech as the paradigm, the very epitome, of what new Labour is about in the Bill and the debate. From the start of the debate

and in the opening speech from the Leader of the House, we have heard the politics of envy, red in tooth and claw—that is what new Labour is all about. I strongly object to so much of what comes from the Labour Government because of their obsession with the words "modern" and "new". If anything in the United Kingdom is traditional, they are against it: a priori, by definition, if it is not modern, it is bad—that is new Labour's thinking. That thread was started by the Leader of the House and it has shot through every single Labour Member's speech.

I stand here to expose the smokescreen that has been thrown up. With this Bill, the new Labour Government are trying to bring old and new Labour together by telling those who rebel against them on matters such as lone parent benefit or nuclear deterrence that they are at least getting rid of the hereditary peers. The Bill is designed to muzzle the left and enable the Government to say, "We're throwing you a bone, we're giving you a sop—we're going to get rid of the hereditary peers' voting rights for you." That is what it is really about: class prejudice of the old and worst kind. In making it clear that, when the Bill goes to the upper House, he will accept 91 hereditary peers carrying on, the Prime Minister has accepted the hereditary principle. The left of new Labour and the extreme left of old Labour do not like that, but they are muzzled.

As a distinguished commentator speaking in a Radio 4 documentary said recently, there is a lot of republicanism on new Labour's Benches. This very afternoon, when one of my hon. Friends pointed out that the logic of Labour's position suggested that Royal Assent should be abolished, there were a lot of "Hear, hears" from Labour Back Benchers. However, the Prime Minister does not want to do anything that smacks of disloyalty to the monarchy, so again he muzzles his Back Benchers on the subject of the hereditary principle.

Mr. Rammell: We have heard that bogus point about the relationship of the hereditary principle to the House of Lords and the monarchy before. Is the hon. Gentleman aware of a pamphlet published by the Tory Reform Group, which argues:

"Those that think, if the hereditary peerage goes, the monarchy will be next have no clear grasp of the clear distinction between the role of legislators, who make laws, and the role of a sovereign, who acts on advice"?

If he cannot convince members of his own party, does he really expect to convince us?

Mr. Hawkins: There are several possible responses to that question, but the first is to remind the hon. Gentleman of the point I was making when he intervened. When it was said that the logic of the Labour party's position was that Royal Assent should be abolished, there were a lot of "Hear, hears". As the presenter of the Radio 4 documentary said, when surveys are sent out to Labour Members asking whether they would abolish the monarchy, many hon. Members respond in the affirmative. However, they are not allowed to say so in public or to be honest about it in the Chamber, because their party leadership would not be happy were they to do so. That is what is really happening: Labour Members are being muzzled to prevent them from saying anything inconvenient, but that undermines the logic of their position and the class prejudice displayed in the Bill.

When we consider the role of the second Chamber in a bicameral legislature, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) said, the important point is the scrutiny of legislation. I am especially concerned about the scrutiny of secondary legislation. My hon. Friend was right to say that a vast amount of legislation takes the form of delegated legislation, and I want any reformed second Chamber to be able to scrutinise properly European directives and secondary legislation. That is vital, so we must press, by means of detailed reasoned amendments to the Bill both here and in the other place, to ensure that any reformed second Chamber is able to provide that proper scrutiny. It is crucial that our legislature, in both Houses of Parliament, should be able to hold the Executive to account. The large amount of secondary legislation that passes through the House, especially that which originally emanates from Europe, needs detailed scrutiny and the electorate require both Houses of Parliament to give it that scrutiny.

As on so many issues, of which the Bill is merely one example, the Labour party has let the genie out of the constitutional bottle, with no idea of where it will go. We can already see the grand project coming to grief with the creation of the Scottish Parliament. It was announced that the right hon. Member for Glasgow, Anniesland (Mr. Dewar) who is currently known as the Secretary of State for Scotland, would be Scotland's First Minister, but the polls now suggest that he will not, and that the First Minister of the first Scottish Parliament will be the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond), because Labour will lose the election in Scotland as a result of letting the genie out of the bottle. Only last night, I heard about polls showing that, in the Welsh Assembly elections, there will be huge gains for Plaid Cymru at the expense of Labour. Again, the Labour Government have let the genie out of the bottle and they must now reap the consequences.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): Will the hon. Gentleman say which polls show that the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) appears likely to become First Minister of Scotland? Every poll that I have seen recently suggests the opposite.

Mr. Hawkins: Time will tell—we shall see when the voters go to the polls. Conservative Members have been warning that the great danger posed to the Labour party by letting the genie out of the constitutional bottle is that, when the Scottish people have a chance to vote, Labour will find that it is not in charge.

Mr. Savidge: I repeat my question: which poll suggests anything other than that the Labour party is expected to be the largest party in the Scottish Parliament? I have not seen one recently that says that.

Mr. Hawkins: I repeat my answer: we shall see. The poll that matters is the poll when votes are cast. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will have the courage and courtesy to apologise to me if I am proved right when the Scottish Parliament is elected. Several polls that I have seen forecast Labour losing ground and the Scottish National party gaining. The hon. Gentleman cannot deny that.

Mr. Wareing: In view of the hon. Gentleman's recent remarks and his answers to my hon. Friend the Member

[Mr. Wareing]

for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge), is the hon. Gentleman now conceding that his party will be defeated in the Scottish Parliament elections?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. We have had quite enough of that. Let us return to the subject of the House of Lords.

Mr. Hawkins: On that point, I shall say only, of course not, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was pointing out that the Labour Government have let the genie out of the bottle and will reap the consequences. The same is true of the Bill.

Dr. Starkey: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hawkins: No, I have given way several times and I must now make progress.

One of my particular concerns is whether there is another smokescreen in the Bill. Has yet another deal been done between the Prime Minister and the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) to guarantee to the Liberal Democrats that there will be a second Chamber elected by proportional representation? Is that part of the Cabinet Committee's consideration of those issues? Is that an issue on which the Government have not shared the truth with the British people? Many people would be concerned if there had been deals that the Labour Front Bench had not informed Back Benchers about.

Every time something is revealed, we find that Labour Back Benchers have been kept in the dark. They seem to me like mushrooms in that they are kept in the dark and have tons of ordure piled on them, particularly when it comes to secret deals between the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats.

Before I finish my speech—

Fiona Mactaggart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hawkins: I shall certainly give way to the hon. Lady, whose inherited wealth could buy and sell most of the Conservative parliamentary party.

Fiona Mactaggart: I suppose that gives the lie to the hon. Gentleman's earlier remarks about class hatred on the part of Labour Members. He began his speech by complaining about the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Mr. Hope) and saying that he would not answer it immediately but would do so later in his speech. The 10 minutes that is allocated for each Back Bencher's speech is about to end and he has not yet answered that question. Will he take the opportunity, in his concluding remarks, to tell us whether he supports clause 1?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. There is no time limit on speeches.

Mr. Hawkins: If the hon. Lady had been listening to what I said, she would know that I suggested that the hon. Member for Corby listened to the whole of my speech, as we are supposed to listen to one another in the Chamber, and then drew his conclusions. I ask the hon. Lady now to do the same.

I shall quote the words of a former Labour Cabinet Minister to answer some of the points made by the hon. Member for Corby when he poked fun at the upper Chamber. That distinguished former Minister said of the upper Chamber:

"We think of ourselves as the best here. We're far more intellectual, in fact we're altogether far better, than that lot down there. If you had an elected house, what would you end up with? Second-raters, people who couldn't get into the Commons, MEPs but worse."

I am sure that the hon. Member for Corby will want to discuss that matter with Lord Longford because that is the answer to much of what he was saying.

The Leader of the House said in her opening remarks that this Prime Minister was the first voluntarily to give up part of his patronage. However, we appreciate that giving up the power to appoint Cross-Bench peers is yet another tiny sop, yet another bone tossed into the air. The real use of patronage to fill the upper House with Tony's cronies is in the underlying subtext, which says, "We are going to move towards parity in the upper Chamber." That is what academic commentators are concerned about.

Mr. Hope: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hawkins: No, I have given way a great deal and I must now make progress because others want to speak.

I shall quote one or two non-Conservative, independent commentators. Anthony Barnett, the former director of Charter 88, said:

"Surely Labour should first decide how it will replace the Lords with a democratic chamber? Otherwise it will create an Upper House that is so pliant and illegitimate that it will expose the government to the charge of dictatorship".

That quote is from his very good book, "This Time", which was published in 1997.

The professor of politics at Oxford university, Vernon Bogdanor, said in his book, which was also published in that year:

"It is by no means obvious why the ability to defer to the wishes of one's party leader constitutes a better title to a place in a legislative chamber than the claims of heredity. Labour's proposal for a purely nominated chamber would involve a quite unacceptable increase in prime ministerial patronage."

The professor of law at Manchester university, Rodney Brazier, said:

"a wholly nominated House would constitute an enormous, ermine-clad quango."

He was referring to the Conservative jibe. He continued:

"There is substance to that observation, and such a nominated House would be the more objectionable if the methods for finding new peers remained unaltered, and if the goal of an elected second chamber were not, in fact, achieved".

It is not only Conservatives who are suspicious of what the Government are up to. I warn Labour Back Benchers and those on the left of the party that they will not like what they are getting from the Government.

This is a bad Bill. It should have allowed those who are doing the work in the upper Chamber, including hereditary peers, to stay on. I do not defend those who never turn up, but it should not matter whether those who do the work and who are able and qualified by experience are hereditary

peers or appointed life peers. Those who show that they do the work should be able to stay on. There is no reason not to accept that principle. I hope that, in due course, the British people and Labour Back Benchers will realise what the Government are really up to.

8.26 pm

Mr. Peter Bradley (The Wrekin): I thought that we were here to debate the principle of hereditary peers in the House of Lords, not whether we should do away with the electoral principle in the House of Commons. The previous speaker was a walking advertisement for that proposition. I suggest that the Conservatives currently have problems in Surrey.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, most Conservative Members have ignored your instructions to be brief and have strayed a long way from the subject of the Bill. I shall try to be brief, not because I want to go to the Lords but because I want to visit the gentlemen's before long.

I am pleased to be able to participate in the debate because we are literally making history. The Bill will put the past behind us, where it belongs, and allow us to embrace the future. I hope that the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) will forgive me for saying that the Bill demonstrates that we are a modern, forward-looking society. We are not intimidated by our history. We are not frightened to make change, particularly when that change is for better government, which is the simple proposition of the Bill.

This is an historic Bill. In barely six lines it consigns seven centuries of privilege to posterity. That is a simple proposition. What is remarkable is that it has taken the world's oldest parliamentary democracy so long to accept that power should not be handed down from generation to generation as if it were a family heirloom; and that no man or woman or class of men and women should, as a matter of right, be able to hold or inherit the power to govern the people of this country.

Tory Members can huff and puff, but they cannot hold the House up and they cannot justify the hereditary principle. It is absurd; it is an anachronism; it is an anomaly. It makes us a laughing stock that political power remains in the hands of 750 families whose forebears—some good men, some not so good—won it or bought it from a monarch—sometimes a good monarch, sometimes a bad monarch—over 1,000 years of history. It is indefensible that power can become a dynastic birthright to be exercised by the few, all too often against the interests of the many.

Such power is enjoyed nowhere else in the world. If this were the Government of Iraq, we would condemn it as corrupt. If this were a regime in Africa or South America, we would be sending Inter-Parliamentary Union delegations. We would make our aid contingent on the development of modern democratic institutions.

That is why stage 1 on its own is justified. It abolishes the rights of hereditary peers to sit and to vote. It may not take us far into the 21st century, but it will at least rescue us from the 13th century. I might add that once we are reforming the House of Lords, it is not too late to consider reforming this House as well. Other hon. Members have elaborated their views of how this House should be reformed. If we are to about to charge headlong into the 21st century, it would be a good idea to draw the House of Commons at least into the 19th century before we leave the 20th.

We are not engaged, as has been suggested, in an act of class war or vengeance. The Bill confers on hereditary peers new rights to join the human race—to vote in elections and to stand in elections. It legitimises, improves and modernises government so that it serves our people better. That simple proposition captures the spirit of the age. People want aspiration, opportunity and achievement in place of privilege and patronage.

Over the weekend we polled 50 of my constituents and asked them their views of the Government's plans for the reform of the Lords: 64 per cent. of them said that they wanted the reform of the House of Lords, and only 15 per cent. opposed the plans. My constituents in The Wrekin want to embrace the future, without being handcuffed by history.

Mr. Grieve: I am interested to hear the hon. Gentleman's figures. What exactly was the question asked—whether there was a need for total Lords reform, or for the abolition of the hereditary peerage without knowing what the total reform will be?

Mr. Bradley: My constituents have a great deal more sense than Opposition Members. We asked them whether they support the Government's plans to reform the House of Lords. They gave us a resounding yes, just as people have done throughout the country when asked the same question. People want a Parliament that is representative, democratic and accountable. The Lords as currently constituted are none of those things.

My colleagues have made much of the statistics, and they bear repeating. Of 635 hereditary peers eligible to attend the House of Lords, 304 take the Conservative Whip; 60 per cent. are landowners; 45 per cent. went to Eton; only 16 are women. The Conservative election guide of 1997, with which I am sure Opposition Members are only too familiar, stated:

"It's important to defend the hereditary principle in its own right."

I shall be fascinated to hear hon. Members on the Conservative Front Bench uphold that principle.

The Conservative election guide went on to state that hereditary peers were "an asset to democracy". It continued:

"Hereditary peers bring colour, tradition, youth and a wealth of experience to Parliament."

Colour—two black hereditary Members of the House of Lords. Tradition—oh yes, there is tradition. It is the tradition of a 3:1 Conservative majority. Youth—54 per cent. of peers are old-age pensioners, and 24 per cent. are over the age of 75. That contrasts strikingly with the composition of the House of Commons, where 6 per cent. of Members are over pensionable age and only 0.5 per cent. are over the age of 75.

Mr. Grieve: That is a bad point, is it not? On that basis, old-age pensioners are badly represented in Parliament, so the balance is redressed by the other House.

Mr. Bradley: The hon. Gentleman misses the point. The point is that in your election guide in 1997, your party made great play of the fact—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman should use the correct form of address. He is addressing me at the moment.

Mr. Bradley: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The conventions of this House require attention, like the conventions of the other House.

[Mr. Bradley]

The Conservatives' election document stated that hereditary peers bring colour, tradition, youth and a wealth of experience to Parliament. If that is what they value in the upper House, they are failing to meet that objective. What commends the hereditary principle to Conservative Members of Parliament is the undeniable fact that the hereditary peers in the upper House are male, from privileged backgrounds, and Conservatives.

The Conservative party has lost its grip on government, it has been ejected from council chambers throughout the country, and it has virtually been banished from Scotland and Wales. It has lost the argument, it has lost its credibility, and it has lost the plot. No wonder it is clinging to the only institution where it does not have to fear elections; where it has a majority without a mandate; and where it can defy the Government and the people who elected it—and it does.

In 1997–98, 33 Government defeats were sustained in the House of Lords and the margin of defeat was smaller than the number of Conservative hereditary peers who voted for it. In 1974–79, when Labour was last in government, 85 per cent. of the Divisions led to Government defeats. In the past 30 years, since the beginning of the 1970s, there have been on average eight Conservative Government defeats in the Lords per Session, compared with 63 Labour defeats.

I notice that the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) is again absent from his seat. I wonder what he meant when he told Charter 88 in a recent interview:

"we won't be ditching our core values".

Those are the core values of privilege, power and the right to abuse that power. Would Conservative Members defend the hereditary principle if Labour had a majority of three to one in the House of Lords? I very much doubt it. It is time for hereditary peers to go, for they have neither legitimacy nor credibility. We can no longer allow this most democratic and respected—indeed, imitated—of Houses of Parliament to remain shackled to that most ridiculous one.

It is not just a question of tidying up the history books; it is part of a radical programme of reform and enfranchisement. Devolution to Scotland and Wales has been mentioned. Once again we are to have a democratic metropolitan authority in our capital city; and there is a move to regional development agencies and chambers, and ultimately to the assemblies that go with them. We are modernising local government and experimenting with proportional representation. We are building a consensus on important constitutional issues with the Liberal Democrats, which I welcome. We have incorporated the European convention on human rights in our legislation, and I hope that there will shortly be a Bill on freedom of information.

All those measures extend and strengthen the rights of individuals to have a voice in their government. Decentralisation empowers individual citizens and transfers government from the few to the many. There are no victims of those reforms. The Lords can return to their stately homes and grouse moors, and if they wish they can prepare for government. They can stand for election and, if the people choose them, they can have their say in this Chamber. If they have a contribution to make and have talent at their disposal, some will doubtless come here.

The royal commission has an historic task—to develop proposals for an upper House with peers who are equal rather than privileged. A House of Lords that will enhance our democratic process must replace a House that is an anomaly, an embarrassment and an affront. The Bill is about modernising Britain and strengthening people's rights. No political party with a future would oppose it.

8.38 pm

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): I came here some 21 months ago with absolutely no appetite for constitutional change of any kind, but the experience of the past 21 months has given me an appetite for radical constitutional change. Of one thing I am absolutely certain: as they are set up, the Houses of Parliament are not working effectively. Our system is designed for primary legislation, yet 3,200 pieces of secondary legislation go through the Houses of Parliament every year. The vast majority of our laws are statutory instruments or orders. It is a kind of administrative government. We have truly become a bureaucracy rather than a democracy.

I am convinced that that deluge of legislation is not being properly scrutinised and that we should change our parliamentary processes to ensure that it is. I am equally convinced that Members of Parliament are failing in their duty properly to hold the Executive to account, and that this House is very much the Prime Minister's poodle.

I suspect that that process has accelerated, largely under this Government, but I am certain that it did not begin with them. These events have been in train for some time. They require radical reform, so I have become something of an advocate of change and of reform.

It strikes me that the question of reform of the House of Lords opens up a great opportunity for us to address some of these issues, but in order to address them, and in order to ask the House of Lords to take on some of the functions that this House is now unwilling or unable to perform, we would have to change the composition of the House of Lords.

As the hon. Member for Corby (Mr. Hope) has pointed out, the House of Lords is undemocratic and unaccountable. If we want it to perform functions, certainly some that I want it to take on—functions that we are no longer capable of carrying out, not always because we are unwilling, but simply because we are incapable of addressing the sheer volume of administrative legislation that goes through the House—and if we want it to play a part in that reform, we must address the issue of its composition to give it some democratic legitimacy.

I can safely say to the hon. Member for Corby—before he rises to ask me the question that he has asked so many other hon. Members—that, although I could support the principle in it, I cannot support clause 1 of the Bill. The reason is simple: any informed discussion of the composition of the other place must first be informed by discussion of what the proper functions of the other place are.

There has been much talk of class hatred and class prejudice from hon. Members on both sides of the House, but I probably have a background similar to that of the hon. Member for Corby. I probably sneakingly share the same resentments—having had to grub for votes to be elected to the House—and perhaps resent those who were

born to such a position, but the simple fact is that Conservative Members who share a fondness for the principle in clause 1 are not prepared to accept the principle that we should change our form of government without having any idea of what it is to be changed to.

A Bill, including the provisions of clause 1, that I could vote for would contain a great deal more than this Bill. All this Bill contains is clause 2, which enfranchises the peers who will be thrown out of the House of Lords. I want an informed debate on the proper reform of the House of Lords, and I want the legislation before me, before we change what we have.

8.43 pm

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): I am pleased to take part in the debate. I have believed in House of Lords reform and the abolition of the hereditary peerage all my political life. I do not believe that this is a matter for fine argument or fine judgment; it is a matter of right and wrong. It is fundamentally wrong that we still have people voting in our system of government simply on the basis of the families into which they were born.

The hereditary peerage, and the element of chance that it introduces to our system, is worse than governing by the luck of the draw. People who become hereditary peers come, by and large, from one background and from one interest group with one set of values, and support one political party. That is why the hereditary peerage is fundamentally objectionable.

The hereditary peerage is also objectionable because of the fundamental and overwhelming political bias, to the Conservative party, that it introduces to our system. It was interesting to see what were almost smiles on the faces of Conservative Members when they attempted to defend—supposedly dispassionately—that party imbalance. It is indefensible; everybody knows that, which is one reason why we have introduced these reforms.

The reforms are long standing and have been put clearly over the years. Three times this century there has been agreement that hereditary peers should no longer vote in the House of Lords. On the last occasion, the House of Lords itself agreed, by a majority of 5:1, that they should go. However, on every occasion that those proposals for sensible reform have been introduced they have been blocked, because of the vested interests of the hereditary peers and of the Conservative party, and because it was argued that the reform package should come in one package, as a whole. That is why the Government have introduced a two-stage reform. History has taught us that if reform is introduced in a single package, it will be blocked by the powers of the vested interests.

If we believe that it is wrong for hereditary peers to have the right to vote in the House of Lords, it is also wrong that they should have the right to determine who their successors should be and how the successor House should be constituted. We explicitly said in our general election manifesto that we would reform the House of Lords in two stages, and that is what people voted for and what we are delivering.

One issue that has not been addressed this evening, but has been discussed in previous debates in the House of Lords, is the Salisbury convention—the constitutional fix that sanitises the indefensible principle of hereditary peers. The Salisbury convention provides that proposals in a political party's manifesto should not be voted against on Second Reading and should not be the subject of wrecking amendments. I maintain that that convention not only does not work, but undermines the current operation of the House of Lords.

The Leader of the Opposition intervened on Lord Cranborne before Christmas. There had been veiled threats from the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Minister responsible for constitutional affairs that this Bill and others would be wrecked, regardless of the fact that this measure was in the Labour manifesto, because the Conservative party disagreed with the Government's proposals on Lords reform.

Lord Kingsland let the cat out of the bag last year in a debate on House of Lords reform, when he said that the abolition of hereditary peers was

"a solution to a problem that I do not recognise. Therefore, in my submission, the Opposition would be entitled to think most carefully about whether or not the Salisbury Convention applied to the Bill."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 15 October 1998; Vol. 593, c. 1054.]

No matter that this measure was a manifesto commitment and that 13.5 million people voted for it. No matter that that resulted in the biggest election victory for any party this century. His Lordship said that this measure was a solution to a problem that he, in his wisdom, did not recognise. The constitutional fix of the Salisbury convention, which many Conservatives use to defend the indefensible, was blown apart.

I contend that, because of its hereditary make-up, the House of Lords is not an effective revising Chamber. As it lacks democratic authority, it does not have the legitimacy that it should have to challenge the elected Government of the day. Because it is the poodle of a political party, it is not respected by Labour Members when it makes blocking proposals.

Mr. Grieve: I may be leading the hon. Gentleman on, but from his remarks I take it that he believes that the second Chamber should, in future, be elected, so that it has a democratic mandate.

Mr. Rammell: I certainly believe that the second Chamber should be democratically elected in part—not wholly—because this Chamber must remain the supreme governing body within the Houses of Parliament. Conservative Members talk about the independence of the second Chamber, but where was that independence when the poll tax and rail privatisation were pushed through?

During rail privatisation, when the Government were decaying and no longer had a parliamentary majority, they did not even command the respect of their own Back Benchers. Massive opinion poll evidence showed that there was total opposition to rail privatisation. Even in those circumstances, when one would expect a revising Chamber to oppose and block the Government, that did not happen.

Mrs. Laing: The hon. Gentleman is factually wrong. That did happen. The House of Lords significantly amended the Railways Bill, and the Conservative Government accepted the Lords amendments.

Mr. Rammell: My argument is that, in the circumstances, the Bill was so fundamentally

[Mr. Rammell]

objectionable—and, overwhelmingly, public support was not given to it—that it should have been a matter not of amending, but of blocking the Bill. I bet my bottom dollar that, had a Labour Government been pushing that Bill in those circumstances, they would not have been as reticent.

Mr. Letwin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Rammell: No; I want to make some progress.

Let me now discuss, in detail, some of the other Conservative opposition to the Bill. It appears, broadly, to be based on the concept that this Labour Government want a compliant second Chamber packed with what the Conservatives describe as "Tony's cronies". According to them, there will be a huge increase in prime ministerial patronage. If that is so, why are we saying that no political party will command a majority in the transitional Chamber? Why are we only seeking parity with the Conservative party in the House of Lords?

The Conservatives argue that we want the second Chamber to become the Prime Minister's poodle. How can that be, given that, on the basis of the current figures, we would have to create a further 15 Labour life peers out of what would eventually be a total of 529 in order to gain parity in the second Chamber? That hardly justifies the language that we have heard from Conservative Members about Labour's attempts to dominate and swamp the House of Lords.

It is also not true that, just because people are life peers, they are compliant in their attitude to the party that nominated them. I do not think that Lord Hattersley, whose "Endpiece" article in *The Guardian* I saw this morning, could be described as a compliant poodle of the new Labour project; but he has been nominated by this Prime Minister, under this Government. Lord Shore, who opposes every aspect of the Government's attitude to Europe, has also been nominated by this Prime Minister, in this Parliament, under this Government. I do not think that the Conservatives' case adds up.

Let us now examine the Conservative defence of the hereditary principle. My hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mr. Bradley) has already highlighted the Conservative party's ludicrous attempts, in its 1997 election guide, to justify the retention of hereditary peers, on the ground that they bring colour, tradition, youth and a wealth of experience to the House of Lords. Lord Cranborne tried to take that a stage further when he said:

"We are well on our way to being a cross-section of society when only 2.5 per cent. of that Chamber are women."

We should remember that recently—in the last Parliament—the House of Lords, with its hereditary peers, had an opportunity to rectify matters. It was proposed that the eldest child, whether male or female, should succeed to an hereditary title. The hereditary peers, with the support of the Conservative party in the House of Lords, blocked that proposal to introduce some form of equality.

I think that the real defence advanced by the Conservative party is more subtle. It is, I think, that these matters are complicated; that it is difficult to come up with an alternative; and that the Lords are not actually very political. In June 1996, the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), said of the House of Lords:

"Has it been showing bias over the years, dispensing favour to one party in government and refusing it to another? Not at all."

How could anyone reach such a view, looking at the way in which the House of Lords, with the support of the hereditary peers, has blocked legislation proposed by Labour rather than Conservative Governments over the years?

I thought it strange that the former Prime Minister should advance such a view. I think that most Members of the House of Commons consider him to be a decent man in many respects. How can he ignore the facts? My hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) put his finger on the nub earlier. However partisan the platform of the Conservatives may be, they believe that their interest always coincides with the national interest. Many Labour Members will have heard Conservative politicians at local level saying, "We are not political. We are just Conservative"—I see nods from Conservative Members. It is that which undermines the case that they make.

If anyone were left in any doubt about the lack of substance in the arguments of the Conservative party, or the offensiveness, in many senses, of those arguments, they need simply read some of the debates in the House of Lords recently and some of the things that Conservative hereditary peers have said. I give two quotations to finish with. Baroness Young said:

"I believe . . . it is a constitutional outrage to use a manifesto"—

which was put forward during a general election—

"to make a major constitutional change."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 14 October 1998; Vol. 593, c. 943.]

Just follow the logic and implication of that statement. The people have absolutely no right to decide matters of the constitution that affect the government of our country. I am sure that she would have gone on to say that they should leave it to their superiors and betters.

The contempt for democracy that is inherent in Conservative party attitudes was best summed up by Lord Cranborne, former Conservative leader in the House of Lords, when he referred to Members of Parliament—Members on both sides of the House—as "myrmidons". Although I have a degree in modern languages and, therefore, some facility with language, that was a word that I had not come across before. I looked it up in the "Oxford English Dictionary" and the definition is "a hired ruffian" or "a base servant".

That speaks volumes about Conservative hereditary peers' attitude towards democracy and Members of the House. It sums up far more eloquently than anything that I could say why the hereditary peerage has to go. We have been trying to do it for almost 100 years. As we approach the 21st century, a testament to the achievement of the new Labour Government will be finally, once and for all, to do away with the hereditary peerage.

Mr. Letwin: Earlier in his speech, the hon. Gentleman said that he was going to tell us about the Government's plans for change of the House of Lords. He has not yet done that. In the last few seconds of his speech, I wonder whether he could tell us what he thinks the Government's plans to change the House of Lords actually are.

Mr. Rammell: The Government have made it absolutely and abundantly clear that they will set up a

royal commission. They have set out the framework within which it will operate. As a sign of their good faith, they have appointed a senior Conservative party politician to chair that royal commission. That is not something that the Conservative party ever did in 18 years of government; it never attempted to create a consensus. We are going forward. We are modernising and we are going to end the indefensible: the hereditary peerage in the House of Lords.

8.58 pm

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): I oppose the Bill because it is inadequate. It is inadequate because it does not deal with the whole issue.

May I apologise in advance for the fact that, having taken part in the debate, I will not be present for its conclusion tomorrow evening?

I am happy to answer the question of the hon. Member for Corby (Mr. Hope). He has asked it of everyone else, but he has not yet asked it of me. I will save him the trouble by answering it immediately. Personally, I do not oppose the principle of clause 1.

I do not defend the hereditary principle. I have not fought to become a Member of Parliament to defend a principle that, had my family had anything to leave—which, sadly, they did not—it would have gone to my younger brother. Worthy as he is, that is manifestly unfair. I could not possibly put myself forward for election and then defend a principle that is manifestly unfair and undemocratic.

Labour Members seem to be arguing for democracy, but they are arguing for undermining democracy. *[Interruption.]* I am not surprised that Labour Members express surprise, because they clearly do not understand what they are doing by supporting the Bill. The Bill should address the overall issue of reforming Parliament and the constitution, but it does not.

Today, the Leader of the House seemed to be very pleased that the primary adjective she could use in describing the Government's proposals was "simple". Time and again, she said that the proposals were "simple", as though that were the Bill's best commendation. The Bill is simple only because it addresses only half the issue.

Maria Eagle: Is the hon. Lady aware that, for 88 years, the Conservative party has been saying that we cannot deal with the issue unless we deal with all of it? Consequently, there has been no dealing with the issue, and the hereditary peerage continues to sit and vote in the other place. Does she not realise that the Bill offers a way of getting the job done?

Mrs. Laing: I entirely disagree with the hon. Lady—the Bill is a way of not getting the job done. If the Government were serious about getting the job done, they should have included all their proposals in the Bill so that the House could consider them. Ministers have had 21 months to do so—what have they been waiting for? The situation is exactly opposite to the one that she describes.

Earlier in the debate, the Leader of the House was wrong about the situation. It is easy to say that we should get rid of a certain system or object, but we are not dealing with the real argument if we do not say what should replace that system or object. Ministers have not dealt with the real argument either in today's debate or in the White Paper, but are simply continuing to delay consideration of the real issues. If Labour Members were serious about getting the job done, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) said, they would not support the Bill in tomorrow's Division.

Angela Smith (Basildon): Perhaps the hon. Lady can help me. Several times today, I heard Conservative Members say how much they supported clause 1, but they would not vote for the Bill because it did not go far enough. Perhaps she will tell us how Conservative Members can support clause 1 after the Tory party's 18 years in government, during which they introduced no such provisions? Some of us are a little confused about the depth of their support for clause 1.

Mrs. Laing: It is a matter of priority. *[Laughter.]* I do not know why Labour Members find that so amusing. In 18 years of Conservative government, we made changes that really made Britain a better place for its people to live in. We did not talk nonsense about modernity or about how the House of Lords Bill would—as the Leader of the House of Commons said today—make for a better Britain. The previous Government's actions in their 18 years in government made for a better Britain. The current Government are simply undermining all those actions and all that is good for the people of Britain.

Labour Members—in the House of Lords Bill, and in their attitude—are undermining democracy itself. The right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) said that he was surprised at Conservative Members' argument that wider constitutional reform was necessary, and that he and other Liberal Democrats were in favour of constitutional reform and recognised the need for wide reform. If he does not mind my saying it, he is being honest—*[Interruption.]* He does mind my saying so. Nevertheless, I commend him on recognising the honesty in Conservative Members' position on the issue. Moreover—of necessity—the honesty of our position shows the dishonesty of the Government's position. The Government are dishonest on the issue because of the piecemeal nature of their constitutional reform.

Mr. Maclennan: As the hon. Lady has been kind enough to refer to me in such flattering terms, perhaps I should say that the message that I was trying to get across was quite simple—that she and her colleagues who are opposing the Bill, and therefore opposing clause 1, are letting the best be the enemy of the good.

Mrs. Laing: I understand the right hon. Gentleman's argument, but I consider it my duty to stand for the best, not just the good. That is why I shall not support the Bill. My constituents sent me here not to accept some mediocre little compromise, but to argue for what is right. I am not here to argue for what is popular in the opinion polls or for the old-fashioned, dogmatic principles of Labour Members, who have argued for the abolition of the House of Lords for years and years. Now they want to do it, but there is no point in doing it in such a second-class fashion. I shall take the right hon. Gentleman's advice and continue to argue for what is best.

[Mrs. Laing]

Labour Members are arguing not on principle, but purely for party advantage.

Mr. Savidge: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Laing: I cannot give way again because I do not have time.

The need for reform is not determined by the fact—pointed out by so many Labour Members—that there are usually more hereditary peers who support the Conservative party than any other party. That is a nonsensical argument. When I made the point earlier, Labour Members seemed to find it amusing, but peers are by their nature independent. They can choose to be members of the Conservative party, but they did not get there because they were put there by the Conservative party.

That should not be the basis of the argument. We should not be arguing for party advantage, as the Labour party is. We are arguing on matters of principle. If we were arguing merely for party advantage, we would want to keep all the hereditary peers.

Mr. Ivor Caplin (Hove): You do.

Mrs. Laing: The hon. Gentleman is wrong. We do not propose to keep all the hereditary peers, because we are prepared to argue on principle.

Mr. Paul Clark (Gillingham): I am confused about which principle the Conservatives are fighting on. The Conservative party's campaign guide in 1997 said:

"It is important to defend the hereditary principle in its own right."

Conservative Members have said that they do not agree with that. What is the Tory party's position?

Mrs. Laing: The principle of any parliamentary reform should be about how the people hold the Government to account. That is the principle on which I argue for reform of Parliament. If we had a principled Government, they would be arguing that, but they are interested only in pressing the right buttons to get the right answers in the opinion polls.

In all the Labour contributions there is a flavour of student debating competitions about whether there should be an upper House and how the country should be run. The difference between Labour's student debating points and the Conservative arguments is that we recognise that this is not just a matter for knockabout arguments; it is a very important issue because it is the basis of our constitutional settlement. The principle is how the people should be able to hold the Government to account. The answer is through a strong Parliament. The Bill weakens Parliament and weakens democracy.

9.9 pm

Mr. Paul Clark (Gillingham): I shall heed your earlier comments, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and keep my contribution short.

There is confusion among the Conservatives. Most of them, with the exception of those on the Front Bench, have supported clause 1. I have referred to the 1997 campaign guide, which says:

"It is important to defend the hereditary principle in its own right."

Tory Members were asked why the Tory Government did nothing for 18 years, and about what had happened in the previous 88 years. There was confusion in their response—that the Bill will not do anything because it is dealing with a single issue and not the whole thing. We have had the added bonus of smokescreen issues, such as the monarchy, the German constitution, Tony's cronies, predictions about the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments and even the evolution of fish.

To help speed up proceedings, I intend to concentrate purely on the Bill. This Chamber was elected by some 31 million people. Those people listened to a political debate and cast their votes, according to their preference, to indicate the leaders whom they thought would bring the necessary help in terms of better schools and health care and improved transport, jobs and prosperity.

I doubt whether many of those people realised when they cast their vote on 1 May 1997 that it would be partly devalued and reduced in importance because of some event or favour granted some 500 or 600 years ago. Some 743 men and 16 women have the privilege of sitting in our Parliament and voting on the policies of a democratically elected Government purely because of one thing—the fact that their parentage gave them that power. They are not there on merit; they are not there because of their own good works. They are not there because my constituents said that they should be there. They are there through the grace and favour of monarchs of centuries past.

Nobody could seriously believe that that can be right for this country, or any country. In fact, one would go a long way to find any country where rights and responsibilities were passed to people purely because of their birth line.

It is worse than that, because there is also the fact of the vast in-built majority—a majority which, as we have heard, never changes. One need not take my word, or those of my right hon. and hon. Friends, for this; the Library contains clear statistics that are available to all. That majority delivers for one political party. It does not matter which party wins the election; the Conservative party always wins in the House of Lords. Some 48 per cent. of hereditary peers take the Tory Whip, compared with under 3 per cent. who take the Labour Whip. Those are the important statistics. Even a fan of "Alice in Wonderland" could not call the second Chamber "representative" or in touch with British society—unless that fan was Viscount Cranborne.

The vast majority of people in this country achieve success and responsibility through their own merits. Some 59 per cent. of hereditary peers are there solely because of parentage. Only 8 per cent. in total are women. The largest political party in the House of Lords is the Conservative party, which stands at 41 per cent. The Labour party stands at 15 per cent. For this Chamber, the electorate gave the Conservatives 30 per cent. of the vote, compared with 43 per cent. for Labour.

All the matters that have been mentioned today mean that the imbalance cannot be right. Hereditary peers have little in common with the men and women who live and

work in my constituency—for example, the nurses who work in our hospital, the people who work within the voluntary sector and those who work in the Shelter office. Many of my constituents have served their country in the forces, and in the Chatham dockyard, building ships and refitting nuclear submarines; some of those people, I might add, are still awaiting compensation for related illnesses. However, that is a matter for another debate. It is to those people, whom we were elected to represent, that we owe it to ensure that we have an effective, representative and modern parliamentary system to deliver good government. We can all agree that that should be the outcome.

I do not rely on my personal thoughts or even my party's clear manifesto commitment; I undertook a survey in my constituency. I do not claim that it was scientifically based and I did not apply weighting factors to this group or that. However, it was widespread and the results were overwhelming. People in Gillingham want to see an end to the unfair rights of hereditary peers. They think that we should do it now and do it quickly. They want a second Chamber that represents the real world before the next election. Almost eight of 10 Gillingham people believed in the Government's plans and some 69 per cent. wanted to see the work of the royal commission and the Joint Committee completed before then. When I support the Bill tomorrow, I am confident, therefore, that I shall have the backing of my constituency.

I recognise the real and sometimes valuable contribution that some of the hereditary peers have made. It would be wrong not to do so. I pay tribute to the achievements of their ancestors, who often played a valuable part in making Britain great; we should never forget their legacy. I also recognise that some hereditary peers bring real expertise and compassion to the legislative process. However, they have no direct link to my constituents or other people in this country. Gillingham's history contains several links with the House of Lords, but I will not go into that subject in great detail because we have heard much about the historical aspects of the argument.

Some hereditary peers have helped our parliamentary system, but that does not mean that it operates efficiently or effectively. Only 20 per cent. of hereditary peers attended more than two thirds of the parliamentary Session in 1997-98. More than 200 did not attend at all. The regular attenders, most of whom are life peers, carry out the majority of the business of the House. All those facts show that reform is required.

In our work as Members of the House of Commons we meet many people who excel in their areas of work, in some cases battling against the odds to raise families or achieving business success and creating worthwhile prosperity for our regions. Such people clearly understand the social agenda and challenges of today. They work in their communities to develop harmony and bring together different strands of society. Such people could bring their skills and expertise to a second Chamber to give it legitimacy in its own right. The current House of Lords lacks that legitimacy, because of its anachronistic and unrepresentative composition.

I am sure that most people would agree that this is a simple issue. The Government's proposals are clear and concise, and they honour our commitment to the British people. On 13 July last year, Leader of the Opposition said:

> "the reform of Parliament must be above party politics. Rushed and ill thought-out reform, dreamt up in the heat of party political battle, could threaten the foundations on which our freedoms and liberties are based."

Rushed? For 88 years, attempts have been made to reform the House of Lords, every one ending in the sands. As long ago as 1917, an inter-party conference agreed that the House of Lords should not be dominated by one party, that it should contain an independent element and that it should be made up of those with "personal eminence".

The Bill is not ill thought out. The royal commission had a clear task and a definite time scale. I hope that hon. Members will read its terms of reference carefully, as they cover the second Chamber's composition and its roles and functions. It was not always evident from today's debate that everyone had read those terms of reference. With the fullest involvement of all interested parties, we can provide a legitimate and effective second Chamber for a modern and dynamic society.

The only freedoms and liberties that I want to be attacked are those that bear no reference to today's society and to the people whom we represent; by that I mean the freedoms exercised by the hereditary peers when they vote on parliamentary Bills.

Voltaire wrote:

> "Whoever serves his country well has no need for ancestors."

We all needed our mums and dads to be here today, but we need a modern, meritocratic system in which people endeavour to do their best, in their chosen fields, for our country.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): Can't you shut him down?

Mr. Clark: I am coming to a part that may excite the Opposition.

My constituents regard the hereditary principle as outdated and outmoded. That is why the Tory party's Battle for Britain campaign, launched by the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), is doomed to failure. It is a smokescreen, used throughout this debate and the whole campaign, to hide internal divisions in the Conservative party. The Tories claim that Britain's freedoms are under threat from this Government's plans to abolish hereditary peers and that Labour Members do not care about the same things as the British people.

I hope that I have nailed those falsehoods by bringing a clear message from the people of my constituency with whom I have discussed the matter. The Opposition's campaign looks back to the past as the Conservatives try to wrap themselves in the Union Jack. Unfortunately for our democratic process, Her Majesty's official Opposition are wrapped only in a time warp as they fail to look forward or help to create a modern parliamentary system.

The British people expressed their approval of our clear manifesto commitment to an initial, self-contained reform of the hereditary principle. The Government will carry that reform through, and I hope that the Opposition will not try to defend the indefensible.

9.23 pm

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): I shall begin by answering the question that seems always to be asked by the hon. Member for Corby (Mr. Hope), who reminds me of a grand inquisitor general examining people for the oath of the Acts of Supremacy, saying, "Will you subscribe to the oath?" I have to say that I certainly do not subscribe to clause 1, as it stands. Before I do, I need to be persuaded, pragmatically, that what is being substituted for the present arrangements will be an improvement on them.

Otherwise, I am open to persuasion across the range of possible options for reform of the upper House, including, as has been remarked already by several hon. Members, its potential abolition. I rule out none of those possibilities, but we must decide whether we shall be better administered and governed as a result.

Labour Members have argued persistently in this debate that we should go for stage 1 before stage 2, and that stage 1 is discrete and separate. That argument would be more valid had not the Government chosen to embark on such a massive raft of constitutional reform, covering almost every aspect of our lives. When hon. Members consider the matter carefully, they may have little difficulty in agreeing that it is very difficult to know what the second Chamber will have to do in five or ten years' time.

Will it be a balancing chamber in a federal constitution? Will it include regional representation? Will it involve a greater emphasis on the affairs of the European Union and, perhaps, on Members of the European Parliament? We are in the dark on all those matters because of the extent of the proposed changes. If ever there were an argument for leaving reform of the other place to the next Parliament—[HON. MEMBERS: "No."] Yes. It should be left for longer so that we can see how issues such as those work through. To my mind, that would be the best course.

That is not the course that the Government have decided to adopt, so I can only try to do what I have done in other constitutional debates: speak on the options that are available. As I listened to the debate, little chills were struck in my heart when the hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) said that he preferred a mixed second Chamber, part-elected and part-appointed. The hon. Gentleman let the cat out of the bag by saying that his reason for that view was that the second Chamber must be subordinate, and must not challenge the democratic legitimacy of the House of Commons.

I am not hung up about the democratic legitimacy of the House. It is not democratic as it is: we have parliamentary government. What works in the United Kingdom is that our government is as close to consensus as can usually be achieved.

Dr. Starkey: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Grieve: In a moment.

As a result of that system, we can carry out changes and implement policies without people killing each other in the streets. The UK has been remarkably successful over the past century in achieving that, with the exception of the affairs of Northern Ireland. We should not forget that fact. Every time we tinker around, or every time we go overseas and vaunt some new structure, we should remember what the upper House has contributed towards stability.

Mr. Savidge: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Grieve: I shall try in a moment to give way both to the hon. Gentleman and to the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey), but I have little time.

There are three options, and we shall consider them all at a later stage. However, in considering the balance between a second Chamber that is nominated or elected, the idea that gives me most anxiety is that of a mixed second Chamber. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) both argued powerfully for an elected second Chamber, but that would mean comprehensive reform of the structures of the House of Commons. I am not sure that the Government have cottoned on to that fact; if they have, they do not want that reform.

If we are to have a nominated second Chamber, the Prime Minister's exercise of the royal prerogative of nomination will have to be addressed. I am not particularly hung up on the exercise of the prerogative, and there are points to do with it that can be addressed. I do not entirely share the view of my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) that we cannot have an independent commission of appointment, and that we should have to go back to square one. These matters are unclear at present, and that is why I cannot support the Bill.

Time is short, so I shall not develop other themes until the Committee stage, but one last matter requires a response from the Minister. The Leader of the House, who behaved a little like a tricoteuse as she deployed venom on the hereditary peers, reminded me—I am a barrister—that even criminals have rights. One of the Bill's oddities is that hereditary peers are currently deprived of the right to vote because, of course, they have the right to represent themselves. We are planning to deprive them of that right half-way through a Parliament, and that troubles me. There are only 759 of them, but it is an odd anomaly. We could allow their subsistence until the end of Parliament, and introduce the reform before the next general election.

I find it hard to square that change with article 2—perhaps 3—of the second protocol of the European convention on human rights, which I have taken pleasure in commending to the House. We should not start a process of what is supposed to be democratic reform by infringing on people's rights under the constitution, but that is what we propose to do. I should be grateful if the Minister would comment on that matter.

9.30 pm

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): This has been a most interesting debate. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) said, its context is probably the most profound, rapid and wide-ranging constitutional change in the history of the United Kingdom. Whether that change will knit together to produce a coherent whole, our successors will judge; we are not optimistic.

The surprising thing is that the White Paper that accompanies the Bill is almost wholly lacking in long-term radicalism. The terms of reference that it sets for the royal commission begin:

"Having regard to the need to maintain the position of the House of Commons as the pre-eminent Chamber of Parliament".

The problem has been brought out in this debate, but not in the White Paper. My hon. Friends the Members for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) and for Epping Forest (Mrs. Laing)—I cannot miss the opportunity to wish her a happy birthday—brought out clearly the fact that the problem is not whether this House is pre-eminent in Parliament, but whether Parliament is pre-eminent in the country. Does Parliament have a serious, effective role in checking the Executive?

Dr. Starkey: I have the six points that your leader set out as the principles of reform—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady intervenes a great deal. She should know by now how to address hon. Members.

Dr. Starkey: I am sorry. The leader of the Conservative party has set out six principles. The last says that

"the supreme authority of the House of Commons as the focus of democratic accountability in our country must remain intact".

Can the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) explain how that equates with what he said about Parliament, rather than the House of Commons, being important?

Mr. Letwin: I am terribly sorry if my phrasing made the hon. Lady incapable of understanding what I was trying to say. Our problem is not the pre-eminence of this House, which we believe should be maintained, but that neither House has anything like the pre-eminence over the Executive required for accountability. My hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) made that proposition clear. He listed some of the areas in which it is above all true.

Laying aside all party politics—*[Interruption.]* Opposition Members may not wish to, but it is sometimes valuable in discussing the constitution to take it seriously. I would be surprised if Labour Members did not agree that neither House has the ability to stop the Executive, through the Whips, carrying primary legislation. My hon. Friends the Members for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) and for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) clearly made my next point. I would be surprised if Labour Members, some with long and distinguished parliamentary careers, thought that either House is seriously capable of checking the Executive's efforts to bring forward secondary legislation. How many hon. Members are even aware of the great bulk of the secondary legislation passed in their name, year by year?

On Europe, several hon. Members mentioned the extraordinary turn of events of the past 30 years. The prerogative power, once thought to have been defeated in the 16th and 17th centuries, can now legislate via Ministers, as long as 14 Ministers from other countries are present.

Mrs. Beckett: Who did that?

Mr. Letwin: Still in debating mode, the right hon. Lady asks me who did it. I admit that it was done by the consent of the whole House, including the previous Government. Alas, it remains the fact, and debating points do not change serious facts. If the Government could get over debating points and get down to the business of constitutional reform as if it were a serious matter, it would be better for the House and the country.

Maria Eagle: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Letwin: I want to make some progress. I have a sneaking suspicion that I know what the hon. Lady wants to ask because she has asked it about 15 times already, but I shall give way later.

The third area is Executive action. The fact is that the Government act not only through legislation—secondary or primary. They act on a huge terrain, with 600,000 or 500,000 civil servants. Does this or the other place seriously have an effective check on those civil servants and their actions or upon the Ministers in whose name that action is taken? My hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring referred to judicial activism, which is on the increase and is hugely important.

Beyond that is a point that will surely resonate in the minds of even the most obdurate Labour Members. They must agree that it is an extraordinary state of affairs when, according to our constitution, the Executive can change the constitution perfectly legitimately by the mere device of appropriately whipping the House with no more than a slight delaying power in the other place. That extraordinary situation obtains in no other major democracy. There are serious deficiencies in our present constitution—I do not seek to lay blame; we all share it. They are facts. The problem is that the Bill does nothing to address any of those problems relating to Parliament.

Maria Eagle: I raise a different point. The hon. Gentleman has outlined a compelling case regarding the accountability that should be forthcoming in this place, but which is ebbing away. What did his Government do about that during their 18 years in power?

Mr. Letwin: I am sorry that the hon. Lady has returned to debating points. The honest answer is: not enough—but if she thinks that that is an excuse for her Government to make an enormous number of constitutional changes without addressing the problem, she is much mistaken.

The fact is that, looking to the future, the Bill leaves what my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Mr. Green) called a "void". It is exactly what my hon. Friend called a "south sea bubble prospectus". As my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath said, it is a smokescreen. Behind that smokescreen, is de facto unicameralism. The Bill reinforces what the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) described accurately as a presidential system without the checks and balances. That is the problem that we face and the problem that the Bill does not address.

Mr. Maclennan: I have enormous respect for the hon. Gentleman and I am grateful to him for giving way. However, I think that he is being a little less than fair to the Government in respect of accountability and the discharge of power. In the last Session of Parliament, human rights legislation was enacted—which gave the judiciary the power to protect citizens against abuses of power and of

[Mr. Maclennan]

their fundamental rights and freedoms—together with legislation that distributed power to Scotland and Wales and re-established power for London. This is a process, not a written constitution that will deal with all the hon. Gentleman's queries. However, I hope that he will welcome the Bill as a step towards achieving the kind of balance that is clearly needed in a modern constitution.

Mr. Letwin: Unlike some Labour Members, the right hon. Gentleman is engaged seriously in these matters. I take his point entirely: some of the Government's actions, however ill aimed in practice, were well intentioned in that they tried to give more rights to the citizen. Alas, the Government so elevated the judges in some cases and other bodies in other cases, without looking seriously at the need for parliamentary accountability, that they merely created one monster to slay another.

The problem with the Bill is that it does not solve what might be called the "phase 2 problem". Labour Members are not unintelligent: they have an answer, which almost all—there have been some honourable exceptions—have given. Labour Members have said, "This is just phase 1; let's wait for phase 2. In phase 2, everything will be resolved."

Mr. Hope: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Letwin: Dear me, no. However, I shall respond to the hon. Gentleman. The scene resembles the Monty Python sketch in which someone calls out, "No. 9", and then there is a response to the joke. The sad fact that the hon. Gentleman must accept is that we do not oppose clause 1 in principle. We oppose it in this Bill only because of the deficiencies to which I have drawn attention: the legislation does not tell us what will replace that which is being removed. Until we receive a serious and decent answer to that question, no right-minded person can conceivably support clause 1 or any other clause of the Bill.

The question is whether the Government are serious and honest in saying that they are going to come forward with a phase 2 that will solve the problems I have described. I admit that the jury is out and that we shall see the decision in due course, but the evidence is not comforting. As the right hon. Member for Chesterfield said, there is reason to fear that the transitional scheme will be permanent. The reason is partly that we are 20 months late in seeing a royal commission; partly that, after the royal commission, there is to be a Joint Committee; partly that, after the Joint Committee, unless I am much mistaken, there is in all likelihood to be a general election; and partly that there is all the possibility in the world that phase 2 will never occur.

I do not rest my case on that—there is something much worse. It is that, even assuming that phase 2 will occur, the White Paper gives us absolutely no indication of the sort of radical thinking that is necessary to address the problems of Executive power. Page 36 states:

"The role of the second chamber should continue to complement"—

what reassuring, complacent words; they could have come straight out of Bagehot or Dicey in one of his worst moments—

"rather than duplicate the role of the House of Commons."

In effect, we are to have a twin poodle—another Chamber that will, via the Whips, the Prime Minister and the prerogative power, continue to be under the thumb of the Executive.

If the Government and the Labour party were serious about reform, as opposed to abolition, we should have heard about matters in this debate that we have not heard about from Labour Members, but that, reassuringly, we have heard about from Conservative Members. Those matters include pre-legislative scrutiny; the need to provide a serious check on prerogative legislation in Europe, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) clearly pointed out; serious scrutiny of Executive action—*[Interruption.]* It ill behoves the Leader of the House to be commenting, given that she was not present for a single moment when those remarks were made. The matters also include measures to address growing judicial activism and to make quangos more accountable. We have not heard Labour Members mention any of those matters, even in passing, and the White Paper makes no mention of them at all.

The White Paper reads as though there were no problems to address, but my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell), my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells), my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, and my hon. Friends the Members for Stone, for Surrey Heath and for Beaconsfield suggested extraordinarily radical approaches to problems that do indeed exist. Some went so far as to suggest that the de facto unicameralism should be transformed into simple unicameralism. I cannot currently join them in that camp, but does not the suggestion indicate a capacity to think through the problem that is, alas, despite all its majestic support, wholly lacking in the White Paper and nowhere present in the extremely thin Bill before the House? What is it that we face?

Dr. Ladyman: Can the hon. Gentleman tell me how many of those serious issues would be addressed by leaving the hereditary peers in place?

Mr. Letwin: I do not say that they would be addressed by leaving the hereditary peers in place; however, I do say that they would be addressed by a Government who were serious in their intent to reform, rather than to abolish. In coming months, because we take the problem seriously and because we accept the position that we, the country and the House are in, the Conservatives will make radical and serious proposals for the reform not only of the House of Lords, but of the constitution of Parliament as a whole, and for the rebalancing of the constitution of this country as a whole, so as to remedy the problems that the Labour Government have partly left untouched and partly greatly exacerbated. I regret that it should fall to the Opposition to fulfil that task, but if needs be, we shall fulfil it.

9.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. George Howarth): As might have been expected, today's debate has been fascinating

and, at times, passionate, as strong views were expressed by hon. Members on both sides of the House. We all accept that the reform of Parliament goes to the heart of our constitution, so it is natural that people will hold strong views on the subject.

Despite that, in one important respect, today's debate has followed the pattern of debates on other constitutional measures that have already gone through the House: we have heard two clear, but divergent, approaches. Most Opposition Members hold to the perverse view that, despite having evolved over hundreds of years, the British constitution as it existed on 1 May 1997, was almost perfect and could not be improved upon. No alternative to our proposals has been suggested tonight.

Mr. Letwin *rose—*

Mr. Howarth: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman in a moment. He said that the Conservatives intend to state, in due course, what they would do. At this stage, we still do not know their approach to this matter. We know only that they are opposed to our approach. I now give way to the hon. Gentleman, but briefly, because I want to make progress.

Mr. Letwin: I am grateful to the Minister, who is always courteous. I wonder whether he was listening when I said that I thought that there were grave defects in the constitution, admittedly exacerbated by the present Government, but also, alas, inherited by them.

Mr. Howarth: The problem with the hon. Gentleman's approach is that he proposes no solution. He and his hon. Friends oppose every proposal that we make to improve our constitution. Although they may say that there is a case for change, they always oppose specific change.

The hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) also is always courteous, but I take issue with him quoting—correctly—a sentence from paragraph 7 on page 36 of the White Paper, which says:

"The role of the second chamber should continue to complement rather than duplicate the role of the House of Commons."

The hon. Gentleman described those words as complacent, but he did not quote the rest of the paragraph, which continues:

"The House of Lords provides a valuable function of scrutiny without which the burden on the House of Commons would be greater and the quality of government legislation diminished. As has previously been noted, over the past ten years the House of Lords has made nearly 2,000 amendments a year to government legislation. These are most often government amendments, frequently brought forward in response to points made in both Houses. Legislative scrutiny will continue to be an important purpose of a reformed second chamber."

The hon. Gentleman should not quote only one sentence from a paragraph. It would be as well for the House to hear the whole paragraph, which, I glad to say, it now has.

By contrast, Labour Members and, to be fair, the Liberal Democrat representative, put forward a very different view. We recognise that there are strengths in our constitutional arrangements, but we intend to build on them and adapt them to the times in which we live rather than the halcyon days of the past. I make no apologies for saying that we want to modernise our constitution so that it more closely reflects the needs of the country as it moves towards a new century, rather than its needs of a century or more ago.

It is time that we got on with making such changes. There could be no better illustration of that than our approach to the reform of the House of Lords. Some backtracking is now occurring, but I am astonished that anybody could stand up and seriously argue that people should have the right to serve as members of a legislature on the basis of nothing but an accident of birth. At least the hon. Member for West Dorset accepted that clause 1 and the first phase were supportable. I shall come on to the flaw in the rest of his argument in a moment.

We have made progress today in that the official Opposition are not prepared, at least not publicly, to defend the right of privilege in the legislative arrangements for hereditary peers. Yet despite that step forward, in 1999, in one of the world's oldest and proudest democracies, the majority of members of one of the Chambers of Parliament is comprised of those who sit there, not by virtue of their own merits, but simply because one of their ancestors may have performed a service, small or large, for a monarch many hundreds of years ago.

That is an absurdity that cannot be allowed to continue. It is not as if hereditary peers are a benign, decorative aberration, as some would like us to believe and as Conservative Members have claimed tonight. In this Parliament alone, we have witnessed at first hand how hereditary peers wilfully and repeatedly sought to overturn the clearly expressed wishes of this democratically elected House.

Perhaps we should not be surprised by that. The simple fact, which probably goes a long way towards explaining the stance taken by Conservative Members on the Bill, is that throughout the past three quarters of a century the House of Lords has regularly inflicted defeats on measures introduced by Labour Governments.

The statistics are striking. I shall quote from research paper 98/104 produced by the Library, from which the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Island quoted earlier. [HON. MEMBERS: "Easter Ross."] I am sorry, I meant the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan). If I stick to the simple formula "Caithness and much else", it will probably serve us well.

The research paper states:

"From 1970-71 to 1997-98 the average number of Government defeats"—

in the House of Lords—

"per session is 63"—

for Labour—

"compared with 8 for Conservative Governments."

That statistic has been independently calculated and is incontrovertible.

The hereditary peers, whose right to sit and vote in the upper House will be removed by the Bill, are not a cross-section of society who, by some accident of birth, express views that are benign and non-partisan. The evidence suggests the opposite.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: The hon. Gentleman is making the point that his right hon. Friend the President of the Council made—that a higher proportion of defeats has

[Sir Nicholas Lyell]

been inflicted on Labour Governments than on Conservative Governments. Will he tell the House what serious defeats impeding the mandated programmes of Labour Governments have been inflicted? Is it not the case that Labour Governments, on the whole, have introduced radical legislation, going back to trade union legislation and nationalisation legislation, which was highly controversial at the time and which has mostly been repealed since, those repeals now being accepted by the present Labour Government?

Mr. Howarth: The right hon. and learned Gentleman fails to address the fact that in this Parliament and in previous Parliaments, Labour manifesto commitments were overturned by the House of Lords. In the last Session, the European Parliamentary Elections Bill, which I freely grant that Opposition Members did not like, was a manifesto commitment by the Government. That was sent back no fewer than five times—or was it seven?—by the House of Lords.

Mr. Cash: On the European Parliamentary Elections Bill, I freely admit that under no circumstances would I vote for our position on that, because as far as I was concerned, proportional representation was out of the question, and the House of Lords should never have agreed to it, as a matter of principle.

That is just a minor matter. On the subject of defeats in the House of Lords, before I entered the House I happen to have been involved in the legal process in the House of Lords regarding the Aircraft and Shipbuilding Industries Bill, which was one of the flagships of the Labour Government of the time. I can tell the Minister, if he does not know, that the Lord Chancellor, the late Lord Elwyn-Jones, was on the Committee that ditched the Aircraft and Shipbuilding Industries Bill because the House of Lords was prepared to listen to the arguments on hybridity, which I say—some people may recognise this when I say it—may yet return in relation to this Bill.

Mr. Howarth: That was a long intervention. I made the mistake of mentioning the word "Europe", at which point the hon. Gentleman sprang to his feet. My right hon. Friend made it clear that the arrangements in the House of Lords are different from those that the hon. Gentleman describes.

Those who sit in the House of Lords by accident of birth overwhelmingly represent and vote for one political interest. They have shamelessly ensured that the Conservative party has a built-in 3:1 majority over other parties in another place. It does not matter to them how the electorate may have voted or what measures it wants them to support. Even when the Conservative party has been decisively rejected as it was on 1 May 1997, it has still been able to count on its built-in majority in the upper House, and has had neither shame nor compunction about using that majority.

The sorry combination of Conservative Members and hereditary peers makes our case more compellingly than any speech in this Chamber tonight.

Dr. Fox: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Howarth: I shall not give way because I have only five minutes left.

I shall now deal with some of the questions that the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) asked in his opening speech. He asked whether we would have the chance fully to debate that Weatherill amendment, as it will not be introduced until the Bill reaches the Lords. The hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) gave the transitional House argument for that. The House will have an opportunity to debate amendments passed in the other place when the Bill returns to the Commons. As my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House said earlier, the Government have made it clear that they are minded to accept such an amendment, but only if it enables matters to proceed by consensus. We will not know whether that is the amendment's effect until the Bill is in the House of Lords.

The hon. Gentleman also asked what guarantees there were that there would be a second stage. We have set the royal commission an extremely demanding timetable, but it is realistic and it guarantees continued momentum. The White Paper made it clear that if we can get a consensus and if the commission meets the timetable, we shall make every effort to ensure that the second stage of reform is approved by Parliament by the next general election.

Several Opposition Members asked why the royal commission had not been set up 20 months ago. The simple answer is that the royal commission's terms of reference are that part of its remit is to take into account the wider context of devolution, human rights and developing relations with the European Union. That simply would not have been possible 20 months ago because all those matters remained to be considered—*[Interruption.]* I presume that the hon. Member for Woodspring would have preferred those matters to have reached the statute book before a royal commission took them into account.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether the Government had ruled out a fully elected second Chamber. We think that it would be wrong to pre-empt the consideration that the royal commission will give. To indicate a preference at this stage would be to clip the royal commission's wings. Frankly, it would be insulting to ask it to consider all those matters having stated what the end of the process should be.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether the Labour party will give evidence to the royal commission, and whether that evidence will be taken in public. It is a matter for the Labour party, but I should imagine that it will. Certainly, it will be for the royal commission to decide whether it conducts its proceedings in public or otherwise. I am sure that at least some of its proceedings will be in public. He also asks how long the joint Committee will last. That will be a matter for both Houses of Parliament, but the Government have made it clear that the joint Committee will meet after the royal commission has reported. We hope that it will be possible to ensure that the second stage of reform has been approved by the general election.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) and one or two others asked why we do not

go for what one of my hon. Friends called "the big bang". The obvious answer is that every previous attempt at a single-stage solution has failed, usually because the then Conservative party took the view that, although change was necessary, that particular change was not. While that position is allowed to prevail, we shall never get reform the House of Lords through Parliament.

We seek, first, the abolition of hereditary peers, which everybody apparently now agrees is the right way forward, and, secondly, a second stage that will attract as wide a consensus as possible. Only by consensus can we move forward.

Debate adjourned.—[*Mr. Allen.*]

To be resumed tomorrow.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Thursday 4th February, notwithstanding Standing Order No. 16 (Proceedings under an Act or on European Union documents), the Speaker shall—

(i) put the Question on any Motion in the name of Mr. Secretary Straw relating to the Police Grant Report (England and Wales) not later than Four o'clock; and

(ii) put the Questions on any Motions in the name of Mr. Secretary Prescott relating to the English Revenue Support Grant Reports not later than Seven o'clock.—[*Mr. Allen.*]

ADJOURNMENT

Ordered,

That—

(i) this House, at its rising on Tuesday 16th February, do adjourn till Monday 22nd February; and

(ii) the provisions of paragraph 3 of Standing Order No. 10 (Wednesday sittings) shall not apply to the sitting on Wednesday 10th February.—[*Mr. Allen.*]

COMMITTEE ON MODERNISATION OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

Ordered,

That Rachel Squire be discharged from the Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons and Mr. Gordon Prentice be added to the Committee.—[*Mr. Allen.*]

COMMITTEES

Madam Speaker: It will be convenient to take motions Nos. 5 to 9 together.

Ordered,

Defence

That Mr. Menzies Campbell be discharged from the Defence Committee and Mr. Mike Hancock be added to the Committee.

Health

That Ann Keen be discharged from the Health Committee and Mr. Ivan Lewis be added to the Committee.

Home Affairs

That Miss Melanie Johnson be discharged from the Home Affairs Committee and Mrs. Janet Dean be added to the Committee.

International Development

That Mr. Dennis Canavan be discharged from the International Development Committee and Mr. Tony Worthington be added to the Committee.

Social Security

That Mr. Vernon Coaker be discharged from the Social Security Committee and Ms Debra Shipley be added to the Committee.—[*Mr. Hope, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*]

Water Fluoridation

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

10.1 pm

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): The existing state of the law governing the addition of fluoride to the water supply is most unsatisfactory. The water industry resents the discretion—and, therefore, the responsibility—that is placed upon it. Those who oppose the addition of fluoride to water resent very much the power and influence that is placed in the hands of health authorities and water companies. For my part, I share the natural suspicion of any free man with respect to the presumption of health professionals to decide what is good for me and whether or not I should consume it. Are we horses to be led to water and forced to drink?

I am happy to take advice, from any informed source, about what may be good for me with respect to medicine or diet, but I reject utterly the notion that the decision about whether to consume should rest in any other mind than my own. However, it is not that philosophical question upon which I wish to dwell this evening.

My initiation of the debate results from the persistent lobbying of my constituent, Dr. Anthony Dunstan Fox, who practises in Barton-on-Sea. He has drawn my attention to the fact that fluoride compounds are a poison, so much so that I am persuaded that we should be taking considerable steps to remove fluoride compounds from our environment, not providing yet another source of them.

The state of the debate in this country is rather quaint. The Government pride themselves on their modernisations, so it is odd that we still appear to be addressing in this debate the preoccupations, fads and fashions of the 1960s and the 1970s. In the United States, for example, localities and cities are discontinuing their former policy of adding fluoride to the water. In Europe, that trend is equally apparent. Indeed, Germany—which is so much the model for the Government's modernisations—has abandoned the policy of adding fluoride to the water.

That trend is a consequence of a growing consensus—a growing body of evidence—that fluoride compounds are a poison. In the United States, the Food and Drugs Administration has required since June 1997 the makers of any toothpaste product containing fluoride compounds to publish a health warning on the packaging. Consumers who ingest the product are advised to seek the advice of a poison control centre. The National Treasury Employees Union, which represents the Government's most prominent scientists, toxicologists and lawyers, has voted unanimously to oppose any fluoridation of the water.

There is a growing volume of evidence of the poisonous consequences of fluoride compounds. In this brief debate, I cannot possibly do any justice to that evidence, nor am I qualified to do so, but I draw the attention of the House to the work of Dr. Phyllis Mollenix, the toxicologist at the Boston children's hospital in Massachusetts. Her work attempts to define a causal relationship between the presence of fluoride products and changes in brain activity that may give rise to hyperactivity and learning difficulties. Hon. Members may be aware of the work of Professor Shusheela, who has tried to find a causal relationship between the presence of fluoride compounds in very small quantities and irritable bowel syndrome, anaemia, bone weaknesses, dental and skeletal fluorosis, genetic damage, still-birth and miscarriage.

However, the medical establishment in this country is still wedded to the notion that fluoride compounds are good for us and should be put into the water supply. It is either unwilling or incapable of addressing the growing volume of evidence. That may be due to intellectual laziness, but if it is, it is strange that it is wedded to a campaigning zeal. Its unwillingness to consider the evidence goes back a long way. As far back as 1970, the *British Dental Journal* contained an article which stated:

> "Perhaps the greatest deterrent to meaningful political engagement of dentists in the promotion of water fluoridation is the mistaken but widespread assumption that to do so they must have full and complete knowledge of the detailed and voluminous scientific literature on the relationship of water fluoridation to dental and general health. They do not . . . as soon as dentists recognise their responsibility in the politics of fluoridation, their performance will be outstanding. . . . the emphasis is on propagandising rather than education."

I doubt that any of the Government's spin doctors could have put the point better. Indeed, it is an opinion of which Dr. Goebbels would have been proud.

All I can say about my party's position on fluoridation is that it was inherited from the previous Administration. My party believes that there are benefits from fluoridation—a view I regard as curious—but the decision to add fluoride compounds to the water should be taken locally. I believe that it should be taken at a very local level—by the consumer. Whether any meaningful locality could be defined for the purposes of a water supply is problematical.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) for opening up the debate on this subject. He has asked the medical establishment—the British Medical Association in particular—to produce new evidence to prove that fluoride compounds are good for our dental and general health, and that they are not bad for us. I welcome his initiative but, when surfing the internet, I noted that the website of the pro-fluoridation lobby names him as one of its supporters. As I understand it, that is not his position, and I urge him to correct that.

The medical establishment clings to the tenuous belief that fluoride compounds are good for our dental and general health, despite the fact that the evidence is pretty thin. If fluoride compounds attack the bacteria that would otherwise decay our teeth, it is probably because they attack all living organisms, including us. I cannot imagine why any mammal would ingest fluoride compounds. They are pollutants and are increasingly evident in our environment largely as a result of industrial and agro-chemical processes, such as fertilisers. We should make strenuous efforts to remove those compounds from our environment rather than add another source. If we add fluoride to our water, it will be in our milk; it will be in our cereals; it will be in our vegetables; it will be in our soup; it will be in our tea; it will be in our beer.

Dr. Doug Naysmith (Bristol, North-West): Does the hon. Gentleman therefore conclude that chlorine should

not be added to water, because it is nasty? Chlorine is clearly a poison, which kills living things, including bacteria.

Mr. Swayne: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I sought an Adjournment debate so that I could speak about the addition of fluoride compounds to the water supply. I am uniquely unqualified to follow the direction in which the hon. Gentleman wishes to lead me. I shall merely say that I have the benefit of swimming a quarter of a mile in the Serpentine every morning, and that, fortunately, for most of the year chlorine is not added to the water—and very healthy it is.

It would be legitimate for the advocates of fluoride compounds to ask, "Where are the casualties? Where are the sick children, and the sick elderly people, who must be consequences of the fact that fluoride compounds are added to 10 per cent. of our water supply?" I would answer that question with another question: "What resources has the Minister's Department—have we—put into identifying the victims? What new studies have we initiated to update ourselves about evidence of the damage that is being done by fluoride compounds?"

In that context, let me draw attention to the findings of Dr. Schatz. Dr. Schatz is no ordinary physician: he discovered streptomycin. In 1993, Dr. Schatz said that artificial fluoridation

"may well dwarf the thalidomide tragedy, which was dramatic because it produced crippled children who are living testimonials to what that drug has done. Many victims of artificial fluoridation, on the other hand, die quietly during the first year of their lives, or at a later age under conditions where their deaths are attributed to some other cause."

I urge any water authority and any water company seeking to acquiesce to a health authority's suggestion that fluoride should be added to water to bear those words in mind. I urge the Minister to consider them before introducing any measure that would ensure that my constituents and their children had to drink water to which fluoride compounds had been added.

10.13 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): I congratulate the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) on securing a debate on the important issue of improving oral health, especially that of children. As we have heard, the subject provokes forceful reactions both for and against the fluoridation of water supplies, and I think it important for me to discuss it in the broader context of public health.

The country has seen dramatic improvements in health over the past 50 years, and that includes oral health. Along with the key role played by the dental profession, the addition of fluoride to both toothpaste and water has made a significant contribution to reducing the amount of dental decay, especially in children. That is in line with the first of two key aims that we set out in our consultative Green Paper "Our Healthier Nation":

"to improve the health of the population as a whole".

However, we cannot be complacent. More than half the country's 15-year-olds still experience decay in their permanent teeth. Significant inequalities remain in the oral health of the population.

For example, in 1995, five-year-olds in the west midlands had, on average, less than half the number of decayed, missing or filled primary teeth of those in the north-west, and 19 per cent. more five-year-olds in the west midlands had no tooth decay at all compared with their counterparts in the north-west. A similar picture emerges when we look at 12-year-olds and their permanent teeth.

Above all, all other things being equal, the worst off in society have the poorest oral health. The Government are determined to change that and to narrow the health gap—the second key aim in "Our Healthier Nation". That was also the main theme of the recently published report of the independent inquiry into inequalities in health, which was led by Sir Donald Acheson, former chief medical officer at the Department of Health. The commissioning of that report by the Government should be viewed as a measure of our determination to tackle inequalities in health.

The great challenge for local health authorities is how to improve oral health generally and how to tackle those inequalities in health status. Reducing inequalities in dental health will not be easy. In some places, there is a history of sporadic dental attendance. Many people visit a dentist only when they are in pain. They may not maintain regular brushing regimes with fluoride toothpaste. Some children do not even possess a toothbrush.

That is why proposals are made to fluoridate the water supply in areas with high dental decay. The evidence shows that fluoridation of the water supply to the optimum level of one part per million can reduce the amount of tooth decay in children from similar backgrounds by one third to a half.

In this country, about 500,000 people receive water that is naturally fluoridated at, or about, the optimum level of one part of fluoride per million. A further 1 million people receive water that is naturally fluoridated at a lower level, but that still confers some dental benefit. Those areas are generally found in a band running down the eastern side of the country from Hartlepool in the north to parts of Essex. Some 5 million people receive water where the fluoride content has been artificially increased to a level of one part per million. Major schemes operate in Birmingham and throughout the west midlands, and in Tyneside.

The Government are aware of the persuasive evidence that fluoridation is an important and effective method of protecting the population from tooth decay. In "Our Healthier Nation" we quoted the example of Sandwell. The water supply there was fluoridated in 1986. Over the following 10 years, the amount of tooth decay in children more than halved. During the same period, Oldham, an area with a comparable population mix and no fluoridation, saw little change in children's oral health.

That example has been replicated in many other places over the past 50 years. Sadly, it is also true that, where fluoridation schemes have been withdrawn—in Anglesey and in Kilmarnock, for example—levels of tooth decay in children have risen, after having fallen during periods of fluoridation.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): Does the Minister believe that mass fluoridation ever has any adverse side effects? Is he prepared to commission new modern evidence that will assess both sides of the argument?

Mr. Denham: If hon. Gentleman will bear with me, I was just going to turn to the scientific evidence and the issues that we need to consider.

[Mr. Denham]

I acknowledge that some people have concerns about the safety of fluoride. It is important to examine carefully any claims that risks may attach to fluoridation, as well as the benefits.

On the overall question of safety, it is unfortunately true that virtually all medical and public health intervention carries risks as well as benefits. On fluoridation, it is for scientists—specialists in toxicology and dentistry—to advise on the balance of those risks to the benefits, and for Government to decide what is acceptable.

The current position is that, over the years, many health problems alleged to be linked to fluoridation have been investigated and no link has been found. The most recent research in this country of which we are aware concerns a potential link with hip fractures. So far, that has also proved to be unfounded. There is yet to emerge any convincing evidence of harm to general health as a result of drinking artificially fluoridated water at one part per million. Indeed, it is estimated that, throughout the world, some 210 million people drink artificially fluoridated water.

The view that fluoridation of water at that level is safe is that of the majority of medical and scientific opinion throughout the world, based on practical experience and research over the past 50 years. There is currently evidence of just one minor, cosmetic side effect of fluoridation—dental fluorosis, or slight tooth mottling. Where water is fluoridated at the optimal level of one part per million and parents follow the instructions on fluoridated toothpaste to ensure that children do not swallow excessive amounts, that is seldom noticeable. The teeth are still endowed with extra resistance. If someone is concerned about the cosmetic effect, dentists have several remedies. Often a satisfactory outcome can be achieved by the dentist who polishes the teeth. Within that context, the evidence on fluoridation is highly persuasive.

Half a million people in Britain receive water that contains fluoride naturally present at a level close to or above the optimal one part per million, and 5 million people receive water supplemented to that level. The corresponding figures for the United States are 10 million people receiving naturally fluoridated water and 135 million people receiving supplemented water. Before and during the past half-century of fluoridation, there have been extensive studies of the health of those populations. Apart from improved oral health, the health experience of those receiving the optimal concentration of fluoride is no different from that of the population at large.

As to whether artificially added fluoride would have a different effect on health from the naturally occurring chemical compound, I have been advised that the chemistry of the fluoride ion is identical at relevant concentrations. The effects on levels of fluoride in blood, bone and urine, and the effects on teeth and bone, are identical. Therefore, we can learn from studies of populations who have been exposed to high concentrations of fluoride present naturally in drinking water for generations.

Too much fluoride can, of course, be harmful—just as too much oxygen, too much water or too much of some vitamins can be harmful. The experience on the Indian sub-continent, where much drinking water comes direct from wells dug locally, reinforces the need for the rigorous controls that we have on water purity in the United Kingdom.

It is impossible to say precisely at what concentration fluoride poses a risk to health, but fluoride at the optimal concentration of one part per million has always been present in some water supplies. All the evidence from the United Kingdom, and other countries practising fluoridation, indicates that the total intake from such water, together with that from food and beverages such as tea, is harmless.

I should like now to deal with the process by which decisions on fluoridation are taken, and answer the question on research asked by the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan).

Mr. Duncan: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way again; he has a bit of time left. How extensive would the adverse side effects have to be before he would deem mass medication to be unacceptable?

Mr. Denham: My understanding of the evidence—I have some scientific training, but not in this specific discipline—is that there is no evidence of harm giving rise to any question of deeming it to be unacceptable. I shall therefore decline the hon. Gentleman's invitation to take part in a hypothetical exercise. One should consider the scientific evidence that has been presented. Although millions of people drink water that has been fluoridated—either artificially or naturally—at one part per million, there is no evidence of damage to the health of those parts of the population.

Mr. Brian H. Donohoe (Cunninghame, South): At what age do people realise the benefits of adding fluoride to the water supply?

Mr. Denham: The examples that I gave earlier in the debate show that fluoridation leads to significant improvement in the amount of tooth decay suffered by children. The Sandwell study suggests that, in the 10-year period after fluoridation began, the level of tooth decay in children more than halved. That is a significant change.

The final decision on implementing fluoridation schemes rests with the water undertaker. The Water (Fluoridation) Act 1985 was consolidated in the Water Industry Act 1991. Section 87(1) of the 1991 Act states:

"Where a District Health Authority have applied in writing to a water undertaker for the water supplied within an area specified in the application to be fluoridated, that undertaker may, while the application remains in force, increase the fluoride content of the water supplied by the undertaker within that area."

December's judgment in the judicial review, in which the Tyneside health authorities sought unsuccessfully to challenge Northumbrian Water's refusal to accede to their request to fluoridate their water, confirms that the Act has not worked. Since 1985, 55 health authorities in England—nearly half, taking into account the mergers that have taken place in the past 12 years—have requested water companies to introduce water fluoridation, but none of those requests has been accepted. There have been no new fluoridation agreements since 1985, because none of the water companies has exercised their discretion to agree to a health authority's request. We said in the Green

Paper "Our Healthier Nation" that the legislation needed to be reviewed. The key issue is whether "may" should become "shall".

We have been encouraged by the readiness with which water companies have said that they are prepared to look again at the legal and practical problems of fluoridation. What they most want is clarity over the distribution of responsibilities. They have emphasised that their primary duty is to provide a sufficient and wholesome supply of water. They consider that the question whether a water supply should also contribute to wider public health objectives should be for the health service to decide. Should a fluoridation scheme be approved, the health service should meet the operational costs and indemnify the water operator against any unforeseen cost consequences. There is little in those arguments with which we disagree. We shall seek the views of the water industry on any proposals for legislative change.

Mr. Duncan: How does the Minister define an unforeseen cost consequence? Will he undertake that "may" will not become "shall" during this Parliament, given that the proposal was not in his party's manifesto?

Mr. Denham: I was about to explain how we intend to proceed. The Green Paper "Our Healthier Nation", which we published last year, initiated a consultation on oral health and fluoridation. The responses were overwhelmingly positive. The great majority took the view that no other oral health promotion measure would be as effective in reducing inequalities in dental health as the fluoridation of water in areas with high levels of tooth decay.

However, there were also comments from people opposed to fluoridation, mirroring some of the concerns expressed by the hon. Member for New Forest, West. Some commentators questioned the effectiveness of fluoridation and, together with a larger group, argued— *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton persists in interrupting. I was merely pointing out that the water companies have said that the health service should meet the operational costs and indemnify the water operator against any unforeseen cost consequences.

Mr. Swayne: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Denham: No. I have given way many times and I have only a short time to go.

Mr. Duncan: It is my hon. Friend's debate.

Mr. Denham: The hon. Gentleman has interrupted consistently. I must press on towards the end of my remarks.

Some commentators questioned the effectiveness of fluoridation. They joined a larger group of those who suggested that its safety was in doubt. A few were also opposed on the grounds that mass medication was unethical. I have acknowledged the breadth of views and representations from the water industry and others. We are considering all those views carefully in drawing up a policy statement to be included in the forthcoming public health White Paper planned for the spring.

I am not able to answer all the points that have been raised this evening, many of which will need to be addressed in response to that consultation process. The White Paper will take full account of the sensitivity of this issue, the potential benefits to dental health and the importance of building a consensus on clearly established evidence for the safety and effectiveness of fluoride.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 2 February 1999

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time tomorrow.

HFC BANK BILL

Read a Second time, and referred to the Examiners of Petitions of Private Bills.

IMPERIAL COLLEGE BILL

Read a Second time, and committed.

TRANSPORT SALARIED STAFFS' ASSOCIATION (AMENDMENT OF RULES) ETC. BILL

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON BILL

Read a Second time, and referred to the Examiners of Petitions of Private Bills.

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH

The Secretary of State was asked—

Dentists

1. **Charlotte Atkins** (Staffordshire, Moorlands): How many dentists there are per head of population *(a)* in the UK and *(b)* in North Staffordshire health authority; and what impact Government policies are expected to have on these figures. [67159]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): The number of general dental service dentists per 100,000 of the population at the end of September 1998 was 35 for England and the United Kingdom, and 24 for North Staffordshire, excluding salaried dentists. The Government are funding six Investing in Dentistry bids in North Staffordshire, which will increase the number of dentists by six and allow 16,000 people to receive national health service care.

Charlotte Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. I was horrified, when I was elected in May 1997, to find that there were no NHS dentists in my constituency. Since then, the very good work of John Rose and Liam Stubbs in the local health authority has attracted two more dentists to my area, but we are very much running to stand still. What are the Government doing to encourage more dentists to move into areas outside those covered by the dental schools? More dentists are especially badly needed in health authorities such as North Staffordshire, where dental health is so poor.

Mr. Denham: A number of initiatives are under way to meet that need, and I congratulate my hon. Friend on her close involvement in this matter in her constituency. One of the most important initiatives is the Investing in Dentistry process, from which North Staffordshire has benefited already, and I know that two further bids are under consideration in my hon. Friend's constituency.

So far, 242 Investing in Dentistry bids have been funded across the country, enabling another 600,000 new patients to receive national health service care. It is also possible, of course, to develop salaried dentist services in areas where other dentists cannot be attracted to practise.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Is the Minister aware of the scandal that has developed over the past few months which means that people in Staffordshire have to wait 15 months or two years for dental and other operations at Good Hope hospital? In contrast, people in Birmingham have to wait only five or six months for the same operations.

Will the Minister guarantee that he will look into that scandal and find out exactly why such a discrepancy has developed under this so-called "caring" Labour Government?

Mr. Denham: Inequities in health care between different parts of the country were a feature of the development of the national health service under the previous Administration. I shall, of course, be more than happy to look into local cases brought to my attention by any hon. Member, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that, with the extra investment through modernisation to tackle the pressure of waiting lists, the national health service in his area will do far better than it did under the previous Conservative Government. That applies in all other parts of the country as well.

Neuroleptic Drugs

2. **Mr. Paul Flynn** (Newport, West): What proposals he has to reduce the use of neuroleptic drugs in care homes. [67160]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Hutton): We are aware of concerns that have been expressed about the possible over-use of neuroleptics, and several current initiatives will help to address them, including the National Institute for Clinical Excellence and the national service framework for older people.

Mr. Flynn: I thank my hon. Friend for that helpful reply and for the action that his Department has taken to deal with a distressing problem. The symptoms of senility displayed by many people in care homes are the result not of old age but of the misuse and over-use of neuroleptic drugs.

May I urge my hon. Friend to copy the initiative of the school of old-age psychiatry in Manchester, under which independent pharmacists and doctors were taken into homes? As a result, the use of such drugs was reduced, people's lives were lengthened, money was saved for the NHS and many elderly people were rescued from much unnecessary misery and confusion.

Mr. Hutton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that very legitimate concern about the use of neuroleptic drugs. I shall certainly look into the work that has been done in Manchester.

My hon. Friend may also like to know that we have commissioned the Centre for Policy on Aging to draw up new national standards for residential and nursing care homes. The use of medication in care homes will be covered by the new standards.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): The Minister referred to draft national standards. Will he confirm that there will be formal consultation on them?

Mr. Hutton: Yes.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): Is it not ironic that, while residents of care homes may be over-medicated with neuroleptic drugs, there is massive rationing of psychoactive drugs for people with mental illnesses? What does that imbalance say about the Government's priorities and values? Will the Minister at least admit that that imbalance exists?

Mr. Hutton: I must tell the hon. Gentleman that the use of neuroleptics is very serious, and we are determined to address the issue. He has conveniently forgotten that, as part of our strategy to modernise mental health, we are releasing significant new resources to help purchase new anti-psychotic drugs.

Primary Care Groups

3. **Mr. Andrew Dismore** (Hendon): How many primary care groups he expects to commence during 1999. [67161]

8. **Mr. Jim Dobbin** (Heywood and Middleton): How many primary care groups he expects to commence during 1999. [67166]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): Some 481 primary care groups will commence on 1 April 1999, and they will have the capacity to commission services from that date. The degree of responsibility for commissioning services will be agreed between the PGC and the health authority.

Mr. Dismore: Last week, I met representatives of Barnet West primary care group, who stressed the importance of recognising local factors in the work of PCGs. Does my hon. Friend share that PCG's desire for flexibility both in the setting up of PCGs and in ensuring that our doctors, our nurses and our community are in the driving seat when it comes to planning health care for our local area?

Mr. Denham: I can certainly assure my hon. Friend that we have established PCGs covering all the general practitioners in a particular area in order to put GPs, nurses and other professionals in the driving seat in primary care. As the groups develop, enormous use will be made of the new powers of PCGs to develop much better services.

It is important that local factors and judgment are taken into account. That is why we have made it clear that the pace of development of PCGs over such matters as how quickly they take on the commissioning of services is a matter for local judgment and agreement.

Mr. Dobbin: Can my hon. Friend reassure GPs who are working hard to set up the primary care groups, and to make them work, that clinics and out-patient services provided for their local communities will be adequately funded by each health authority?

Mr. Denham: I acknowledge my hon. Friend's tribute to the active role that GPs are playing in ensuring that primary care groups will work. We have made it clear to health authorities that, where cost-effective and good services have been developed at practice level, we wish to see them continue. We also want to see plans drawn up to spread the benefits of those services to other patients in the PCG area.

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones (Ynys Môn): Will the Minister acknowledge concerns about the extent of lay representation on PCGs? Will he undertake to reconsider lay representation if it is shown that it would be of immense benefit to the PCGs, particularly if it brought in wider expertise from outside the medical profession?

Mr. Denham: I have looked at proposals for membership of primary care groups, and my view is that the different factors involved have been appropriately balanced. It is understandable that people are examining the formalities of PCG constitutions at this stage, but, given existing flexibility, primary care groups will develop effective partnerships to provide primary care at the local level. I am sure that health professionals will draw on the expertise of others, including lay people who are not themselves members of the PCG, to develop effective services. As PCGs evolve in practice, effective working partnerships will be created, and that is most important.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, even by the standards of a Government who arrogantly sideline Parliament as much as they can, it is amazing, when the Secretary of State has published a Bill within the past few days to enable the abolition of fundholding, that fundholding has already been effectively abolished, and that arrangements are in place to dragoon GPs into collectives on 1 April, by which time the Bill will not have achieved even parliamentary consent, let alone Royal Assent?

Mr. Denham: The right hon. Lady has failed to notice the enthusiasm, commitment and dedication with which so many fundholding GPs have committed themselves to primary care groups. They see that this is the right way to develop the national health service. Professional GPs are working in co-operation with other health

professionals to develop better primary care. They realise that we are moving in the right direction, and the right hon. Lady is out of touch with them.

Miss Widdecombe: I am wholly in touch with the timetable: primary care groups are to be set up on 1 April and the Bill has not even commenced its passage through the House. I am aware that the Minister has dodged my question—he is so ashamed of his arrogance that he will not address it. Will he now answer me?

Mr. Denham: The right hon. Lady does not understand either the legal or the parliamentary situation—although it has been set out very clearly and is evident from the Bill. Primary care groups can be, and are being, established under existing legislation. Fundholding will be abolished when the Health Bill achieves Royal Assent—assuming that that occurs. We shall make provision in the Bill—it should be perfectly clear to the right hon. Lady—for a residual fundholding scheme to operate from 1 April. I believe that the vast majority of fundholders will dedicate their energies to developing primary care groups and accept that fundholding will end on 1 April. It is there in the Bill. There will be a residual scheme for fundholders which will continue until the health legislation receives Royal Assent. I have answered the right hon. Lady's question, but she does not like my answer.

Mr. Andrew Reed (Loughborough): The majority of Labour Members warmly welcome the establishment of primary care groups. Will the Minister join me in welcoming the establishment of such a group in North Charnwood—which covers the Loughborough constituency—which builds on existing co-operation between general practitioners in the area? However, will the Minister look closely at the management responsibilities of the group? It does not wish to appoint a manager but wants to allocate existing resources among the general practices in the group. Does that send the wrong signal to others who are involved in the PCG, for example, non-GPs—that it is GP-led?

Mr. Denham: It would be wrong to comment on the particular local example to which my hon. Friend referred, although I shall be happy to look into the situation. We have published guidelines about the way in which we expect primary care groups to develop that strike the right balance between central encouragement and local flexibility. I shall look into the case that my hon. Friend has raised.

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): When the Government were elected, they claimed that they would save £100 million on administration in the national health service. The Government have already allocated a massive sum for the administration of primary care groups and they have stated that health authorities will also have to make money available to that end. The Government also expect GPs and other health professionals to give freely of their time to help with that administration. Have the Government assessed the total cost and effectiveness of primary care groups?

Mr. Denham: The hon. Gentleman fails to realise that, by introducing primary care groups, we will be able to cut out a huge amount of the bureaucracy and waste that were an integral part of the internal market. For example, whereas there were about 4,000 purchasing groups under the internal market, there will be about 600 commissioning groups under the new arrangements. That will enable a huge cut in bureaucracy to occur. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we are on target to meet our aim of saving £1 billion in management costs during this Parliament.

Trainee Doctors

4. **Mrs. Linda Gilroy** (Plymouth, Sutton): What plans he has to increase the number of medical doctors in training. [67162]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): The Government are currently implementing their recent decision to increase the number of undergraduate medical education places by about 20 per cent.—that is about 1,000 extra places—over the next few years. Numbers in postgraduate medical training are also growing to meet future requirements for general practitioners and consultants.

Mrs. Gilroy: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. In inviting bids for that work, will he welcome and encourage new and innovative practices that complement other measures for developing a national health service for the 21st century? I have in mind the bid from the Exeter, Plymouth and Open universities, which, in addition to having a strong community focus, will seek to develop training through telematics and information technologies which will be the stuff of communication for doctors in the next century.

Mr. Denham: I am aware of my hon. Friend's support for that proposal and sure that she will continue to champion it enthusiastically, but it would be wrong of me to comment on any individual proposals. Proposals for new medical schools will be considered alongside proposals from existing providers by the joint implementation group, which is now implementing the increase in medical school places in England. The group will judge those proposals against the objectives that are set, including value for money.

Mrs. Marion Roe (Broxbourne): Will the Minister confirm that his plans for more doctors include the number of qualified medical students who were due to enter the system anyway?

Mr. Denham: The position is that there will be 1,000 medical school places in addition to the number that we inherited on entering office in 1997.

Mr. Roger Casale (Wimbledon): May I take the opportunity to bring to my hon. Friend's attention the existence of Wimbledon Civic Forum's health forum, which brings together local executives from the health sector and local residents to discuss the future shape of health services in our community? Will he acknowledge that such forums and community health councils have a valuable role to play in promoting transparency and

accountability in the new national health service, and will he undertake to review the future role of such forums and CHCs as important partners in the new NHS?

Mr. Denham: I am very interested in what my hon. Friend tells me: I am not familiar with that forum, but perhaps I shall have an opportunity to become acquainted with it in the not-too-distant future. One of the hallmarks of the new NHS is the way in which we are encouraging wider public involvement and consultation, for example, in the development of health improvement programmes, and co-operation between different parts of the NHS. That helps to overcome the fragmentation and competition that were so characteristic of the health service as it was left by the previous Administration.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. I remind hon. Members that the question is on the training of doctors.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): Yes, thank you, Madam Speaker.

In seven years' time, when the last of the new medical students enter medical school, they will be able to look forward to receiving, five or six years later, a basic salary of £16,710. Will the Minister take this opportunity to correct the information contained in the press release issued yesterday, which stated that a junior doctor or house officer would have a basic salary of £26,405? Junior doctors cannot understand why they are expected to do three years in a one-year pre-registration post, or why the Government consider 32 hours of compulsory overtime at half rate to be included in the basic salary. If that is correct, what are the Government's plans to increase the hours over that basic number?

Mr. Denham: Yesterday, we implemented in full the recommendations of the pay review body for doctors, which was the right thing for us to do. We are continuing to make progress on the matter of junior doctors' hours: we have increased the funding to the task forces that deal with that problem; and, although I accept that this is not the thrust of the hon. Gentleman's question, we have made it clear that some of the conditions in which junior doctors are required to work—for example, their access to rest and canteen facilities out of hours—should be improved.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): Does my hon. Friend know how many of the new doctors will receive training in the specialised treatment of cancer? The reason I ask that question is the huge amount of unsolicited tobacco advertising that still pours through people's letterboxes. My constituents are delighted that, in the White Paper, the Government proposed to ban such advertising, but can my hon. Friend tell me when that ban will come into effect, as it may have some bearing on the number of cancer specialists who need to be trained?

Mr. Denham: My hon. Friend raises a number of important issues in his question. We set out our proposals for action to reduce smoking and dependence on tobacco in last year's White Paper, and we are moving ahead on the implementation of those measures. In addition to the need for basic undergraduate training, there is the need to continue postgraduate specialist medical training, for we have to ensure that we are able to meet the service standards and targets that we want to set in respect of the treatment of cancer.

Nurses

5. **Mr. Andrew George** (St. Ives): What assessment he has made of the costs to nurses of on–going and re–entry training requirements. [67163]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): This Government are committed to encouraging the training of nurses. In this year alone, £72 million will be invested in post-registration training of non-medical staff. As part of our effort to encourage former nurses to return to the NHS, we are investing £4 million this year in local return-to-practice initiatives and free return-to-practice courses. We are also making available £36 million over this year and the next three years to help enrolled nurses to upgrade their qualifications. Ward assistants and other NHS staff can now train to be qualified nurses while retaining their existing pay for the duration of the course.

Mr. George: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that helpful reply. What advice can he offer my constituent, Rachel Blight, who broke her nursing career after 14 years for the sake of her family and now wants to return to nursing? She has recently paid £350 for her re-entry training, which involves going 35 miles to the local training centre for three weeks of study and two weeks of practical work. If we want to—

Madam Speaker: Order. This is perfect material for an Adjournment debate. Will the hon. Gentleman get to his question now?

Mr. George: Thank you, Madam Speaker. We want to encourage nurses to return to their careers, but do not such conditions represent an obstacle to them?

Mr. Dobson: Certainly, charging people for such courses is an obstacle, which I why I announced last year that the courses would be free. I shall look into why they are not free in the hon. Gentleman's constituency.

Following the pay announcement yesterday and the advertisement campaign that we have started, 2,874 people had telephoned the helpline by 2 o'clock today for further information about returning to nursing. I shall try to give the House an update later.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South–East): On regional television a few days ago, a nurse from the Royal Bolton hospital made the comment—with which I agree—that there is a pool of young people and others who want to enter nursing but are put off by what they see as the high academic qualifications required to enter the profession. Has my right hon. Friend taken that into consideration?

Mr. Dobson: Many people perceive the present courses as too academic for their liking. We are trying to change the situation to make it easier for people to enter nurse training in various ways. The changes in the past few years certainly put off a substantial number of young people who might well have gone into nursing.

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): I welcome any and every means to increase the number of

nurses in the national health service, but will the Secretary of State guarantee that those steps will prevent a repetition of the case about which I had cause to write to him a fortnight ago? That case concerns a constituent who was told that he needed a quadruple heart bypass operation and that it would be 24 months before the NHS could perform it. His GP told him that if he waited 24 months he would die, so he had to spend £10,000 on a private operation. Surely a case where someone has to pay to save his life represents the ultimate privatisation of the NHS.

Mr. Dobson: All I can say to the hon. Gentleman is that his Government promised that no one would ever have to wait for more than 18 months for in-patient treatment; they did not keep that promise for a single month, but we have kept their promise since April.

6. **Ms Sally Keeble** (Northampton, North): What steps he is taking to increase the number of nursing trainees. [67164]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): Between 1992 and 1994, the Tory Government reduced the number of nurse student training places from 15,000 to 11,000. The figure never rose much above 13,000 in subsequent Tory years. In January 1997, they announced their plans for an additional 1,300 nurse training places in 1997-98. We managed to add 1,400 nurse training places in that year, despite taking over after the start of the financial year.

For this year, we have increased the number of new nurse training places to 15,000 again—the highest figure for six years. If the Tories had not reduced nurse training in their last five years in office, there could now be an extra 11,000 nurses available to work on the wards.

Ms Keeble: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Is he aware of the centre for health care education at University college, Northampton in my constituency, which has had a share of the increase, successfully filling 60 extra nursing places over the past year and planning an extra 100 over the next three years? It filled all those places by careful local recruitment and close partnership. Will he join me in paying tribute to University college, Northampton for successfully attracting more people to fill the extra places that the Government have created?

Mr. Dobson: I would certainly like to congratulate everybody involved in the increase. We have increased the number not only of training places but of applicants per 100 places—from 106 to 120 since we took office.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Why did the Government almost entirely undermine yesterday's welcome announcement, on increasing nursing recruitment by awarding some trainee nurses a pay increase of 11.8 per cent. and junior nurses a decent pay rise, and by not staging the awards, by announcing a pay increase of 4.7 per cent. for two out of three nurses—200,000, or all the rest? When they receive their rise in April, they will be less well off in real terms than four years ago. The Chancellor has £5 billion in the contingency fund. Could that not have been used to pay all nurses a decent increase?

Mr. Dobson: I do not know whether that would be another charge on the famous Liberal penny. The hon. Gentleman should remember that the Royal College of Nursing was very keen that an independent pay review body be established, and that the Government carry out the body's recommendations. We have done exactly that. I do not think that the Royal College of Nursing would want me to substitute my judgment for that of the independent review body, and I have no intention of doing so. We have implemented its recommendations in full.

In negotiations with nursing representatives, I intend to try to make nursing more attractive to experienced nurses, who will be receiving a 4.7 per cent. increase—well above the rate of inflation—together with increments, in most cases, taking their pay increase for next year up to about 7 per cent. Nevertheless, they need to be encouraged. We want to change the grading system, which at present obstructs their career development and holds down their pay.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): My right hon. Friend probably agrees with me that we will never satisfy the Liberals, who said in their manifesto that they wanted an extra £700 million for the health service in this financial year and the next one. In reality, £7 billion is going in as a result of the statement the other month. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in order to ensure that we get enough nurses and other hospital staff, the pay rise needs not only to be adequate but repeated next year? Perhaps he will consider the point that, 20-odd years ago, we found a way of putting the pay of firefighters into the upper quartile. With rare exceptions, the problem was solved.

Mr. Dobson: As my hon. Friend knows, I am very careful about making individual promises on behalf of the Government. The pay settlement and the changes that we want to make in the career structure of nurses over this coming year are intended to start solving the problems of nurse shortages and the way in which the previous Government ran the health service, which resulted in most nurses feeling as if they had been run off their feet and unable to give patients the attention worthy of their professional standards. We cannot put it all right in one go; this is a start.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): May I draw the right hon. Gentleman's attention to one effect of yesterday's announcement and ask him how he intends to ease it? The pay rise granted to nurses, especially new nurses, will have to be met not only by the NHS but by the hospice movement and the voluntary sector, which depend on grants. Is it his intention that those grants should be enhanced, to ensure that the hospice movement and similar concerns are able to afford to pay for good and adequate nursing care?

Mr. Dobson: One way or another, the hospice movement gets substantial grants from the Government. We want to encourage the hospice movement, and when it submits its applications, they will be carefully considered. The right hon. Lady would not expect me to be able to go any further today on that individual item.

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that paying 12 per cent. to newly qualified nurses will be one way of attracting new trainees into the profession? Will he outline to the House some of the other initiatives that the Government are taking to attract more

people to the nursing profession—in particular, action on family-friendly policies and measures to tackle violence in the workplace?

Mr. Dobson: Since we came into office we have been encouraging NHS management to introduce family-friendly policies, not just for nursing, but for the entire staff of the NHS, so that they can do their jobs as well as discharging their responsibilities to their families—for example, by offering staff shifts that enable them to take children to school in the morning and bring them back in the evening.

One of the problems is that, in many places, the shortage of nurses is so acute that it is difficult to provide flexible hours because there are not enough staff to go round. That is why we have launched the £5 million advertising campaign on the back of yesterday's pay announcements, in an effort to break out of the cycle of decline that the health service faces. We also want to change the grading system, as I said.

One of the things that I am frequently told by nurses as I go round hospitals and community services is that they get sick to death of equipment breaking down and going on the blink, which is upsetting for patients and disturbing for nurses. *[Interruption.]* That is why—if the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) would keep her mouth shut and her ears open—I have told the management of the NHS to give top priority, in small capital schemes, to replacing equipment that is constantly failing and letting down both staff and patients.

7. **Mr. Philip Hammond** (Runnymede and Weybridge): What progress he has made in implementing the proposal to create supernurses. [67165]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): Many talented nurses and midwives want to keep on treating patients and training their less experienced colleagues. Up to now, highly skilled nurses who reached the top of their professional grades could better themselves in the national health service only by going into management, so their hands-on skills are lost to patients and colleagues. In future, they will be able to apply to become consultant nurses, instead. We have been discussing the details of that with representatives of the professions, and our plans will be set out as part of our new strategy for nursing.

Mr. Hammond: The fact is that, since the plan for supernurses was announced with a great fanfare last September, not a single one has been appointed. Indeed, the right hon. Gentleman's Department has instructed trusts not to appoint them. Yesterday, the Government announced a pay rise of 4.7 per cent. for the most senior nurses. I shall not ask the right hon. Gentleman whether that is fair or affordable, but will he tell the House whether he believes that it is sufficient to stem the haemorrhage of skilled and experienced senior nurses from the NHS?

Mr. Dobson: I sincerely hope that it is. As the hon. Gentleman would know if he had read the details—and if he has not read the details, let me tell him for the first time—a number of discretionary increments are added for people who are at the top of the more senior scales, which make it possible for their pay to go up by more than 4.7 per cent.

With regard to the proposals for consultant nurses, we made it clear that we would introduce them after we had had thoroughgoing discussions with the representatives of the professions, so that we did not create trouble by establishing them. Those talks are still going on. *[Interruption.]* I can tell the right hon. Lady that doctors, nurses and midwives welcome being consulted about such matters, and not having measures imposed on them, as the previous Government did.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his forthright recognition that one of the ways to keep senior and experienced nurses in the health service is to recognise that most of them have family responsibilities for young children or elderly relatives and that, as well as invaluable work in the NHS, they also do invaluable work at home. I draw to his attention the industrial tribunal case of Hale *v.* Wiltshire Health Care NHS trust in which the trust was found guilty of discriminating by changing nurses' work patterns in such a way that they were prevented from taking their children to school. Will he ensure that all NHS managers implement his family-friendly policies?

Mr. Dobson: Yes.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): Although I welcome the attempts to improve the standard of pay and other matters, such as training for nurses, does the Secretary of State agree that the average patient speaks of a supernurse as one who gives tender nursing care? Is he aware that there is some concern that, with the professionalisation of the nursing profession, some nurses are so busy that they cannot spend the time with patients that patients require?

Mr. Dobson: I have already said that many nurses find that they are run off their feet and feel that they cannot give individual patients the attention that they deserve. We want to deal with that, in part by increasing the number of nurses available so that there is a bit more time for patients. We must recognise that everyone still expects nurses to provide tender loving care for the individual patient, while, at the same time, nursing is becoming infinitely more demanding and complex, as new and incredibly complicated pieces of equipment come on to the wards and pharmaceutical products become more complex. It is very difficult for an individual nurse to reconcile those needs and it is vital that we have more nurses to enable them to do so.

Cervical Smear Tests

9. **Mr. John Heppell** (Nottingham, East): How many women in the Trent health region have received cervical smear tests in the last year. [67167]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Hutton): In the year ending 31 March 1998, 350,617 women in the Trent region were tested, up from 328,014 women in the year to 31 March 1997—an increase of nearly 7 per cent.

Mr. Heppell: I thank my hon. Friend for that response. I congratulate the Government on their recent action in ensuring that quality standards on cervical screening are consistent across the whole country.

Will my hon. Friend confirm that the cervical screening programme has been a success, and has saved the lives of thousands of women, and that a lot of that success is due to the dedication of the staff of the service? The previous Government left the work of the staff unsung; the service was understaffed and the staff were overworked and underpaid. On that last point, will my hon. Friend at least ensure that, in the next pay round, the dedication of the staff is recognised?

Mr. Hutton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for drawing attention to the success of the cervical screening programme. About 4 million women are screened each year in England and it has been estimated that the programme prevents up to 3,900 cases of cervical cancer each year. He might also want to know that coverage in Nottinghamshire is among the highest in the country—slightly over 90 per cent., compared with a target of 80 per cent.

Mr. Stephen Dorrell (Charnwood): I am pleased that the Minister recognises that the cervical smear testing programme constitutes a huge advance in women's health in this country—in the Trent region and elsewhere. Will he also recognise that the programme was introduced—and was given huge stimulation—as a result of the NHS reforms introduced in 1990 by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke)? Will the Minister take this opportunity to congratulate the previous Conservative Government on an important public health programme launched by my right hon. and learned Friend?

Mr. Hutton: I am sorry to have to disappoint the right hon. Gentleman, but I shall not be able to do that. We inherited a situation that was not satisfactory and I should point out to him that one of the consequences of the reforms that he oversaw, and for which he was responsible, was the compromising of the effective monitoring arrangements for the cervical screening tests. He should be ashamed of that.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): My hon. Friend will be aware that the assessment of the cervical tests varies from area to area, and that causes some concern. What mechanism is he considering to drive best practice through the service?

Mr. Hutton: I can assure my hon. Friend that the whole thrust of our reforms, right across the board, is to improve the quality of services available to everyone who uses the national health service, including those women who use the cervical test screening programme.

We want to improve the service across the board. That is one of the priorities that we have identified in all our policy documents, and in all that we have said in the House about our policies.

Nurses

10. **Mr. James Gray** (North Wiltshire): If he will make a statement on how he intends to meet his target for nurse recruitment. [67168]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): Our target is to have enough nurses and midwives to provide the treatment and care that patients need. We therefore need more nurses, and we need them now. That is why we have agreed the biggest real-terms pay rise for nurses for 10 years, and why we are paying it in full.

That is not all. We are also making nursing more attractive by providing more flexible shift patterns. We want to make things better for more experienced nurses by replacing the rigid grading system with arrangements that will help them to develop their careers and reward their additional responsibilities.

Mr. Gray: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. He will know, however, that only 15,000 of the 300,000 nurses in the national health service will welcome yesterday's announcement. In that context, is the right hon. Gentleman not concerned about the NHS Direct service, about which he will shortly make a statement? The service was piloted in Wiltshire hospitals—so well run by the Wiltshire NHS trust over the past three years, incidentally, and set up by the Conservative Government. Does the right hon. Gentleman not fear that a nurse-based service such as the NHS trust—thought up by the Conservatives—will be hard to man if experienced nurses leave the service?

Mr. Dobson: The hon. Gentleman ought to learn to count, or else brief himself before coming into the Chamber. While between 13,000 and 15,000 nurses will receive a 12 per cent. pay increase, another 70,000 will receive an increase of 8.2 per cent. or more, and the remainder will receive 4.7 per cent.

I shall deal with recruitment through NHS Direct in my statement. At this stage, I shall merely say that I have urged NHS management who are involved in the introduction of NHS Direct to try to recruit, in particular, nurses who have had to leave nursing because of industrial injuries. A back injury, for instance, might make it impossible for a nurse to perform the normal nursing task, but that nurse might still be able to deal with telephone callers. Nurses would thus be able to use their skills for the benefit of patients and their own great satisfaction.

Laura Moffatt (Crawley): Can my right hon. Friend reassure us that the superb nurses' award—about which many of my colleagues will be thrilled—will affect neither recruitment nor the modernisation of our health service? Those who work in the health service are our best-ever asset, and we must ensure that we modernise their pay. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the money that has been set aside for modernisation will not be affected by the award?

Mr. Dobson: I can confirm precisely that to my hon. Friend, who is one of two former nurses in the House. We are financing the nurses' pay increase with money that we put into the NHS budget for next year. We made the decisions in July last year, and, not unreasonably, we anticipated that the review bodies would make a recommendation well in excess of the rate of inflation, which they have. We therefore set aside, within the modernisation fund, certain sums to help to pay the increase if it reached the level that it has reached. That is a proper use of money to modernise the health service. I think that many people, especially nurses, detest the

suggestion that there is a conflict between paying nurses a decent wage and looking after patients. After all, it is the nurses who do the looking after.

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): I am sure that the Secretary of State will agree that nurse recruitment needs good schools of nursing. Will he use his good offices to sort out the unseemly dispute between the universities of Portsmouth and Southampton following the transfer of the contract for nurse training? A number of nurse tutors have been left in limbo, because those two public bodies will not agree on which is responsible for redundancy payments.

Mr. Dobson: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I want to improve the arrangements for nurse training, not overthrow them because there have been some good developments. I want to change them, so that there is considerably greater national health service influence over who goes into nurse training and what sort of training there is. The aim is to redevelop the links between the NHS and nurses in training. As the NHS has had so little to do with nurse training in recent years, many of those in management have lost interest in nurse training and not given it enough attention.

Partnership and Quality of Care

11. **Mr. Bill Michie** (Sheffield, Heeley): What new legal duties on partnership and quality of care he expects to introduce during 1999. [67169]

15. **Ms Chris McCafferty** (Calder Valley): What new legal duties on partnership and quality of care he expects to introduce during 1999. [67173]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Hutton): We have set out new duties of quality and partnership in the Health Bill that was introduced in another place on 28 January 1999.

Mr. Michie: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer. I welcome the new initiative, which I believe to be the first on policing legal duties of partnership. Does it include social care?

Mr. Hutton: Yes. If we are to improve services across the board—that is our primary objective—it is important that we find a way of getting the national health service and social services to work much more effectively together. We know from the result of the consultation on "Partnership in Action", which we published last year, that that is overwhelmingly what people want us to do. The Health Bill will, for the first time, remove the legal obstacles that currently prevent the NHS and social services from working effectively together.

Ms McCafferty: Can my hon. Friend confirm that, through the Bill, for the first time, a legal duty will be placed on the quality of care, unlike before, when the only duty placed on trust chairs was to balance the books?

Mr. Hutton: Yes, I can confirm that. Together, the changes that we have published in the Health Bill mark a decisive break from the NHS internal market and its preoccupation with competition, which was the inheritance of the previous Administration. We intend to put quality and partnership back at the heart of the NHS.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): The Minister will accept that new legal duties will suggest new litigation. By how much will the NHS budget have to increase to take into account the litigation that will flow from the Access to Justice Bill?

Mr. Hutton: I think that that is a typical lawyer's perspective. *[Interruption.]* I will answer the hon. and learned Gentleman's question because it is a serious one. The whole purpose and thrust of our new clinical governance and duty-of-care arrangements will be to improve the quality of care. That, I hope, will make it less likely that people will litigate.

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): Will the Minister clarify the Government's policy with regard to primary care centres and, in addition, beacon of excellence awards—proposed targets for practices? In my constituency, the leading general practitioner practice was well lined up to develop such a centre and has qualified for a beacon of excellence award, but, for the past few months, the NHS executive has been completely silent on how the scheme is going forward. Yesterday, the Secretary of State for Health was quoted in a leading paper as saying that he supported such centres, pulling together a wider package of optician services, prescriptions and other health care services, but it seems that the Government policy in that area is somewhat in limbo at present.

Mr. Hutton: With great respect to the hon. Gentleman, the Government's policy is not in limbo. The Health Bill, which I invite him to study, will clearly apply to primary care, but the quality duty that we intend to legislate on is not about individuals; it is about institutions. The principle of clinical governance needs to apply obviously and clearly in the area of primary care, as well as secondary care, and it will.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): Given that elderly patients represent around 50 per cent. of those in hospital, and consistent with the Griffiths report, "Agenda for Action", and Lady Walner's report, "Residential care: options for choice", may I invite my hon. Friend to agree that it is extremely important, as it was when those documents were published about a decade ago, that organisations of elderly people, individual elderly people and elderly people locally should be consulted on services that are vital to their particular needs?

Mr. Hutton: The answer to my right hon. Friend's question is yes. I also draw his attention specifically to two of our current initiatives. The first is the establishment of the new national service framework for older people, which will make a very positive contribution in defining new service models and in setting national standards across the national health service for the care of older people. Secondly, as I said earlier, we are currently embarked on a new regulatory framework and standard-setting exercise for treatment in registered

nursing homes and care homes. Together, the two initiatives offer the prospect of developing policy in that very important sphere.

NHS Drugs and Treatment

12. **Mrs. Virginia Bottomley** (South-West Surrey): What recent representations he has received on the unavailability of particular *(a)* drugs and *(b)* treatments to patients in certain health authorities. [67170]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): I have received representations about availability on the national health service of certain drugs in certain parts of the country. The current situation is quite unsatisfactory, which is why we are establishing the National Institute for Clinical Excellence—NICE—chaired by Professor Sir Michael Rawlins, to assess new drugs and new treatments and to issue authoritative guidance. NICE will ensure faster access to modern treatment right across the health service—which is why it has the support of doctors, nurses, midwives and other NHS staff.

Mrs. Bottomley: Many people hope that the new National Institute for Clinical Excellence will indeed encourage innovation and change. However, people are not prepared for the institute to act as a straitjacket, dampening down innovation and making it more difficult to develop and make available new drugs. Recently, the Secretary of State was condemned by the British Medical Association for an inequitable and irrational approach in reaching his rationing decisions. Health authorities are in despair about how on earth they are to meet the new pay awards. Will the Secretary of State now accept the offer of my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and lead a mature debate on the establishment of rationing and on how decisions are made in the national health service?

Mr. Dobson: All I can say in response to that is that the professions welcome the establishment of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. The BMA chairman was chairing the meeting at which I announced the appointment of Sir Michael Rawlins, and said that I had been as good as my word in appointing to chair the institute someone who commanded the professions' respect. The professions welcome the establishment of the organisation, which I am sure will do a good job. I am sure also that, if anyone is in despair running parts of the national health service, I should not want them to be working in despair—they can go work somewhere else.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): Did not my right hon. Friend inherit a situation that included restraints—which varied across the country—on the availability of some drugs, such as beta-interferon, and huge disparities in the availability of some treatments because of huge waiting lists? Will he ensure that NICE maintains need as its primary criterion when it considers some of the alternative treatments that may become available because of genetic and other treatments?

Mr. Dobson: Certainly, NICE will examine all new treatments and new pharmaceutical products, and it will issue authoritative advice. In some cases, it will be saying, "Get on with it, quickly. This is a good development, and you should introduce it right across the country." Currently, no one performs such a function. In other cases, NICE may say, "We are not too sure about this. The results of its effectiveness testing may not be as good as we should have liked." If so, NICE may recommend that the treatment or product should be made available systematically in only one part of the country, so that further proper tests and assessments can be performed.

The object of the exercise is to have fast access to modern treatment right across the national health service, and not to maintain the ridiculous current situation, in which some drugs are available in one part of the country but not in another, because of the lack of clear advice given under the system that we inherited from the previous Government.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): Is the Secretary of State aware that 22,000 of my constituents made active representations about the closure of the Royal Haslar hospital in my constituency which would be a disaster for the defence medical services and a catastrophe for local residents? Will Ministers take a personal interest in the disaster that would result from the closure, particularly as the hospital in question is close to the constituency of the Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham), and the closure would have reverberations there too?

Mr. Dobson: It is clear that the closure of the Royal Haslar hospital will have an impact on health care in Portsmouth and in Hampshire generally and we are looking into that. I intend to meet the admiral who chairs the Portsmouth acute trust to discuss the matter. He is a most admirable admiral and probably carries a little more weight at the MOD than an ex-civilian.

Primary Health Care (Liverpool)

13. **Mrs. Louise Ellman** (Liverpool, Riverside): What assessment he has made of the role primary health care plays in improving health service provision in Liverpool. [67171]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): More than 90 per cent. of patient contact in the national health service takes place in primary care. In Liverpool, general practitioners and primary health care teams have a major role to play in improving the health of local people and in further developing services. That includes participation in the primary care groups where a key priority will be improving access to local services closer to where people live, rather than in a hospital setting.

Mrs. Ellman: Does the Minister agree that in areas such as Liverpool, where many people suffer chronic ill health, it is absolutely essential that all parts of the health service work together effectively and co-operate with social services? How will his Department encourage the health authority in Liverpool to ensure that primary health care is used to its maximum, working together with community hospitals so that the pressures of chronic ill health do not concentrate solely on the acute hospitals such as the Royal Liverpool and Broadgreen University Hospitals NHS trust?

Mr. Denham: A series of measures is already in hand, or will be introduced in the Health Bill, and will produce precisely the result that my hon. Friend would like. Already, in addition to the development of primary care groups, which we encourage to enable the health authority to grow and develop, there is a health action zone, and the health authority, in co-operation with others, will develop a health improvement programme identifying how primary health care should be improved. The Health Bill will place a duty of partnership on all parts of the NHS. I believe that in Liverpool and elsewhere we are getting the structures right, putting in place the legal responsibilities and providing the resources to enable local people to lead the way in developing better primary care services.

NHS Direct

3.32 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): I wish to make a statement on the development of NHS Direct, the nurse-led 24-hour helpline.

In March last year, we launched three NHS Direct pilot schemes in Milton Keynes, Preston and Newcastle upon Tyne. Between them, they covered more than 1.5 million people. They have proved a great success—up to the end of December, they had taken over 60,000 calls. Independent research has revealed that 97 per cent. of users are satisfied with the service provided, which they find prompt, friendly and professional. It has been particularly popular with young mothers and around 40 per cent. of calls have been about children.

Callers get through at first to a call handler, who takes their details and deals with any requests for basic information. Callers who have a specific health problem are then put through to a nurse. The nurse listens to the caller, assesses the case using what is called an expert computer-based decision-support system, and then recommends what action the caller should take. That can range from immediately summoning an emergency ambulance to advising callers to visit their general practitioner or the accident and emergency department, giving advice on how to treat someone at home, and offering simple reassurance.

A detailed survey of the three pilots showed that, for the latest quarter, 80 per cent. of callers were advised to do something different from what they had intended before they rang NHS Direct; only 9 per cent. of callers had intended to look after themselves at home, but after calling NHS Direct 38 per cent. of them were enabled to do so; 20 per cent. of callers were directed to more urgent care and 40 per cent. to less urgent care; and 530 people were transferred to the 999 service.

It rapidly became clear that the pilot schemes were a success, so last summer I authorised the extension of the scheme, with 13 call centres to cover 40 per cent. of the country—20 million people—by April this year. The first of those opened last month, covering 1.1 million people in the black country. Yesterday, a further scheme covering almost 1.6 million people opened in Essex. A further service covering Nottinghamshire opens next week and the first service in London opens in parts of west London early in March.

The other areas to be covered by about Easter are in the west country; Manchester; West Yorkshire; Hull and East Yorkshire; Hampshire; north-west Lancashire; Birmingham as well as the black country; Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham; Buckinghamshire, Northamptonshire and Oxfordshire; and Newcastle and the north-east. Most of the services will be provided by the local ambulance trust, but they usually involve the local GP co-operatives, other NHS trusts and voluntary bodies. In some cases, local social services are involved as well.

The success of NHS Direct springs partly from the use of modern technology, properly managed and staffed by top-quality professionals with a sympathetic ear. It also depends on commanding the support of the NHS in each locality, particularly the professions involved in providing primary care. At my personal insistence, there will be a major role for GP co-operatives in the delivery of the service in many parts of the country. I am pleased to be able to report that the west London call centre, to be located in Southall, will be run by a local GP co-operative.

Our original intention was to extend NHS Direct to cover 60 per cent. of the country by April next year. However, in view of its growing success and my concern to help the NHS cope with the special problems that it is likely to encounter over the millennium period at the turn of the year, I have decided that the programme should be brought forward to aim to cover at least 60 per cent. of the country by the beginning of December this year. In some cases, that will be achieved through extensions to existing centres where the service is well established and in others it will be achieved through opening new centres. We intend to cover South Yorkshire, Leicestershire, Derbyshire, Liverpool and parts of London. NHS Direct could be particularly valuable in all those areas next winter. To achieve that, we shall be investing an additional £10 million from the NHS modernisation fund on top of the £44 million from the fund already committed to NHS Direct in the coming financial year.

NHS Direct is proving to be a modern, additional, convenient and dependable service for the people who turn to it. It is also proving to be popular and professionally satisfying with the nurses who staff it. One centre recently received more than 300 applications for 50 jobs. Applications for nursing jobs with NHS Direct have come from other parts of the NHS, from the private sector and from those returning to nursing. With the support of the Royal College of Nursing and Unison, I am keen to encourage applications from experienced nurses who have left nursing because of, say, a back injury that left them unable to carry out routine nursing tasks. Working in NHS Direct could give them the opportunity to continue to put their hard-won professional skills and experience to good use to the benefit of patients.

The new schemes should provide the basic NHS Direct advice and information service that has proved so successful in the three pilot areas of Newcastle, Preston and Milton Keynes. From July, the Newcastle centre will be working with local doctors, A and E departments and other services to provide one gateway for out-of-hours services, with a single number for patients to call. That shows the huge potential for using NHS Direct to develop new and better services for patients in a way that is also popular with the professionals involved. Building on the experience of that pilot, I will be prepared to consider similar pilots where NHS Direct has shown that it can deliver the basic service and where there is a joint commitment by NHS Direct and the local doctors and other professionals involved to deliver services in that way.

Arrangements are now being made to set performance standards for NHS Direct call centres, drawing on careful evaluation of experience so far and on best practice for call centres in other sectors of the economy. We are determined to use the capacity of the national network that we are creating to provide the most dependable service. NHS Direct is a good example of the opportunities that new technology offers to help make the best possible use of the professional skill and knowledge of NHS staff, putting 21st-century technology in place for the beginning of the new century.

[Mr. Frank Dobson]

I am pleased with the success of NHS Direct, delighted that it can be funded from the extra £21 billion that we have found to invest in the health service, and glad to have been able to announce today that 60 per cent. of the country should have access to NHS Direct by December this year.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): It is a happy task to give today's announcement on NHS Direct a general welcome from Conservative Members. Our objective always is to improve patient care and to see continuing improvements in the NHS. When the Government do the right thing, we will say so—and this appears to be just such a case. I hope that my warm reception for today's statement does not so shock the Secretary of State that he becomes an early user of the hotline. NHS Direct stands to be popular with nurses, patients and doctors alike. We are pleased that the Secretary of State has decided to build on a project which—as I am sure he is prepared to confirm—we started when in government.

Does the Secretary of State agree that a patient's GP should know of the advice given by NHS Direct to his patient, and by whom that advice was given? Does he accept that the success of the service will depend on the model that is adopted? Is he aware that there is some concern that ambulance trusts may not be the most appropriate providers of the service? Does he envisage lots of local units, or a few larger units? Is it not true that small and local is desirable, but that larger and more central is more economic? How will he strike the balance between the two? Will there be a single nationwide telephone number for the service?

We note that there is already evidence that nurses who have left the NHS will be attracted back to NHS Direct, but what percentage of nurses are applying from other areas of the NHS, given that there is already a shortage of nurses in those other areas? What is the right hon. Gentleman's assessment of any legal liability that might attach to the advice given by NHS Direct? What guidelines and safeguards will be put in place?

We wish NHS direct every success and we want it to add to patient care. We will watch closely the exact way in which it is implemented.

Mr. Dobson: It would be churlish not to welcome the general welcome from the hon. Gentleman—although it may be the sort of general welcome that could be matched by the Russians, who would say that their main general was "General Winter".

GPs will be informed of approaches made on the helpline, provided the person who has rung in gives permission. Confidentiality must work both ways. It applies not only to GPs patients, but to people who ring in to NHS Direct—and so it should. I have made it clear that, so far, ambulance trusts have been the principal suppliers of the call centres because they have the necessary experience and, sometimes, some capacity.

I have made it clear to GPs—and, in particular, those who are behind the GP co-operatives—that I want a greater involvement of GP co-operatives. That is why I say that it is at my insistence—rather against the advice of some of my officials—that GP co-operatives are now so extensively involved. It is also why at least one of the new centres that will come into operation shortly will be run by a GP co-operative. Whoever provides the service, co-operation among all those involved locally is crucial.

The size of units will vary from one part of the country to another. I am a great believer in horses for courses: in some places there will be large horses and in others there will be small horses, because those who are responsible for providing the service locally will decide how best to do it.

We are trying to get a single telephone number, but that is proving more difficult in our relations with BT than we or, I would have thought, most people in the country would have expected, and we will have to do something about that.

We have not as yet set any national performance standards for NHS Direct, because if we are to set sensible standards we will have to draw on the experience of the set-up. Legal liabilities for NHS Direct staff will be the same as those for all other national health service staff.

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. NHS Direct will seem to most people to be common sense, so it is strange that such a system was not introduced a long time ago. I welcome the fact that one of the inquiry centres will be in Wakefield.

Bearing in mind the fact that NHS Direct is about enabling people to make the best use of the NHS, will my right hon. Friend consider the marked differences in the use made of A and E departments from area to area? A while ago, my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, who was then a Health Minister, told me that more use is made of A and E in my area than in most other areas. There are reasons for that. I hope that calls to NHS Direct will be analysed and that we can examine the way in which people make different use of facilities in different parts of the country and tackle the discrepancies and the reasons for them.

Mr. Dobson: Again, as a believer in horses for courses, I note that, for example, when there is a large and famous hospital in a deprived area—such as the centre of Manchester, Newcastle or Leeds, or in certain parts of London—it has been traditional that people who wanted to be attended to went to that hospital rather than to their GP. Generally speaking, it is up to the national health service to adjust itself to people's needs rather than asking people to adjust themselves to the NHS. There may be variations, but we should not necessarily seek to eliminate them; we should simply try to cope with them.

There are large variations in all forms of use of the health service, be it in the proportion of people resorting to A and E or the state of people who are put in intensive care beds. That varies from one tradition to another throughout the health service. We need more uniformity in some aspects of NHS practice.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): The Liberal Democrats, too, welcome the extension of NHS Direct and the fact that it will be more integrated with GP co-operatives. We are a bit suspicious that the announcement was made today because the Secretary of State felt that he needed a good news fig leaf to cover the rather less good news on which we would otherwise have been concentrating.

How many nurses will be engaged in NHS Direct? Will integration with primary care groups, trusts and GPs throughout the areas to which the service is extended be guaranteed? Have the pilot schemes demonstrated any impact on the rising tide of emergency admissions or on the demands on consultants and other practitioners? Have the pilots already shown money to have been saved and pressure moved from other places in the health service?

Mr. Dobson: It is difficult to determine the causes of all sorts of complex shifts in the national health service, especially in winter, but, roughly speaking, twice as many people are advised to do something that is less demanding on the health service as are advised to do something that is more demanding on it than they would have done had they not telephoned. The rest of the hon. Gentleman's points are all part of the Liberal Democrat leadership campaign. We are used to him spending at least a penny every Health questions and such like, and now I suppose it is "Three Coins in a Fountain".

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): I add my congratulations to my right hon. Friend on his announcement, especially as it includes my constituency of Colne Valley, which he visited last year at the time of a meningitis outbreak. How does my right hon. Friend envisage NHS Direct integrating with the other services that support schools, parents and hospitals at such times?

Mr. Dobson: For a start, NHS Direct is supposed to be relatively free-standing and to do its basic job of receiving calls from people who are concerned about the health of themselves, their relatives or neighbours, and giving direct advice. It is likely that, eventually, its functions will be extended to other spheres, but it is crucial that each local service demonstrates that it can do its basic task before it seeks the agreement of the other professionals in the area to extend into more complex spheres. If there were an outbreak of meningitis or something else that is very frightening for parents, the people working at NHS Direct, like everyone in the front line, would be all the more vigilant, and I am sure that arrangements would be made to inform other people in the health service if issues cropped up unexpectedly or needed to be drawn to the attention of people with greater expertise.

Mr. Stephen Dorrell (Charnwood): I join in the general welcome for the national launch of NHS Direct. The Secretary of State's proposal will make an important contribution to the more effective use of NHS resources. He is right about that, but I have one niggle in my mind. Can he explain to the House how he has persuaded himself that an idea, the piloting of which started a year before he took office, is his idea?

Mr. Dobson: The pilot schemes for NHS Direct started after we came into office, in Milton Keynes—[HON. MEMBERS: "Wiltshire."] The pilot schemes started in Milton Keynes, Newcastle upon Tyne and Preston and Chorley. They drew on bits of experience—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] Do you remember, Madam Speaker, going to the doctor when you were a lass and he said, "Say ah"? They cannot stop doing that on the Opposition Front Bench. Obviously, the pilot schemes drew on bits of information and experience that had been gathered in this country and others. That was the only sensible thing to do, because it is best to try to make use of experience. However, the three pilot schemes, run in the way that we intended, were introduced in Milton Keynes, Newcastle upon Tyne and Preston and Chorley, by us.

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): I welcome my right hon. Friend's announcement today that NHS Direct will give jobs to nurses who have found it difficult to continue on the wards because of, for example, a back injury. I ask him to go further and draw on a pool of nurses who have left the profession, perhaps some time ago, because of encroaching disability or an illness, such as multiple sclerosis, and nurses who may have taken early retirement because the physical aspects of the job had become too much for them. Such people have much relevant expertise and making use of that would not exacerbate existing nurse shortages.

Mr. Dobson: I can honestly say to my hon. Friend that that is the very point that I have been making to departmental officials for a long time and I am disappointed with their performance in seeking and securing the recruitment of people who are disabled. The proportions are no greater than for the general recruitment of disabled people, despite the fact that that point has been drawn to officials' attention time and again by Ministers. It is an ideal situation to enable people with immense practical skills and experience acquired in nursing to make use of them, despite having a disability that makes it impossible for them to work on the wards.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I welcome the NHS Direct scheme, and also look forward to reports covering the peripheral regions of the kingdom. I underscore what has been said about the ambulance service, which has years of experience of such work and alongside which GPs have been employed to give really professional guidance. However, may I advise the Secretary of State to be careful about using one telephone number for the whole nation, given BT's lamentable failure to cope with the recent storms in Northern Ireland?

Mr. Dobson: I shall bear in mind all the points that the hon. Gentleman has made.

Mr. Kevin Barron (Rother Valley): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and for the success that NHS Direct has achieved already. The extension of the scheme into South Yorkshire will be warmly welcomed by the people there, who will regard it as a further investment in our national health service. Given what the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) said, may I, as a resident of Southwark, thank my right hon. Friend for extending the scheme to my neighbours in London as well?

Mr. Dobson: As with everything else that we have done, we have tried to ensure that the new developments in the national health service are concentrated initially on the most deprived areas, as part of our general effort to raise the standard of health of people who are the most badly off more quickly than we raise the standard of health of the rest. That very proper and reasonable priority includes the introduction of NHS Direct, and we shall stick to it through thick and thin.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Although the statement is welcome, how can the Secretary of State

[Mr. John Bercow]

guarantee that nationwide implementation of the NHS Direct scheme will not be compromised by the Government's decision to raid the so-called modernisation fund to pay for the welcome increase in nurses' salaries?

Mr. Dobson: There are terms of abuse that one is not supposed to use in the House, but let us assume, for the purposes of answering his question, that the hon. Gentleman is fully equipped with all his senses. He might have noticed that the day after announcing the biggest real-terms pay increase for nurses for 10 years, I am announcing that further expenditure is to be brought forward from the modernisation fund to deal with another aspect of modernising the national health service. The modernisation fund will continue to fund all the other aspects of modernisation to which we are committed. It can do so because, as I explained earlier, we have ensured that it contains a sum to cover the likely additional increase in pay for nurses.

While we are talking about helplines, I can tell the House that the latest figure for people ringing in to express an interest in returning to nursing is 3,400—a rise of 600 in the hour that we have been talking.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Can I ask an awkward—although I hope not malign—question? Does my right hon. Friend recall that I sent him a long and complex paper by Lord Justice Sir Philip Otton on the question of medical negligence? What happens when, in good faith, a person rings up for guidance and, in equally good faith, is given that guidance over the telephone? If that guidance turns out to be disastrously wrong, could NHS Direct be sued in the courts? Does not the potential exist for a legal nightmare, even though people might act in the best of good faith on the basis of what they are told? What is the legal position?

Mr. Dobson: As my good and hon. Friend knows, I have discussed the paper with Sir Philip Otton, and we are holding discussions with other people about the problems of litigation for the health service. However, there is no difference, in terms of liability, between advice given over the telephone through NHS Direct, advice given face to face and advice given over the telephone by anyone else. Liability would depend on whether there was a degree of negligence. That is the legal position and we cannot change it. At some point, something will go wrong—that is inevitable; face-to-face advice goes wrong, and operations go wrong even when they are carried out by the finest surgeons in the land. It is no good our pretending that that does not happen. We must try to make sure that the best-quality advice is available. but the liability for NHS Direct is just the same as it is in any part of the national health service.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): May I congratulate the Secretary of State on the apparent success of the pilots, and welcome their extension to Oxford? It remains to be seen whether my constituents will welcome our pilot or see it as adequate compensation for the millions of pounds worth of social services cuts forced on the local authority by the Government.

What research is the Secretary of State commissioning into whether the pilot schemes have already reduced attendance at A and E departments? Are the figures for Milton Keynes A and E attendances lower than the figures for surrounding areas, or has their rise been smaller? There is a danger that schemes such as the pilots, which appear welcome and worth while, may in fact increase attendances by finding untapped demand.

Mr. Dobson: We must look at the net effect. Clearly, some people who would be reluctant to dial 999 for an ambulance or to try to get their doctor out in the middle of the night will ring up NHS Direct in the knowledge that a 24-hour helpline exists for them. As I have said, one survey shows that 530-odd people were immediately put in touch with an emergency ambulance when they called. It is almost impossible to calculate how many of those people were additional to those using the ambulance service or going to accident and emergency departments.

There have been attempts to analyse the figures, but the relationship between them and what happens on, for example, Tyneside—involving, say, the Royal Victoria infirmary or the Freeman hospital, which are both in Newcastle—and NHS Direct is difficult to discern. I have told the people involved in the schemes that we do not want to come up with a lot of false claims, and, at present, any direct claims could be false and misleading. Roughly speaking, 40 per cent. of calls have involved people who were advised to do something less than they had intended, and 20 per cent. resulted in people being told to do something more. There may be a net gain, but that is not the object of the exercise: the object is to make top-quality advice available on the phone for people who are bothered about their health.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): May I pass on the warm feelings of the people of Milton Keynes about the success of the national health service pilot in our area, which is efficiently run by the Two Shires Ambulance NHS trust? I accept the point that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made in his reply to the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) about the difficulty of analysing different uses of the service. However, will the analysis of the use of NHS Direct in Milton Keynes be made available to Buckinghamshire health authority, so that it may use the information as one of its indices of health care need in the area and ensure that the needs of Milton Keynes are rather more fairly funded within the county than they have been heretofore?

Mr. Dobson: Certainly, all the information will be made readily available. There is nothing commercially secret about it. When I went to the opening ceremony at Milton Keynes, I was somewhat disturbed to observe that the local coroner turned up.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South-West Surrey): Like others, I wonder why we are debating NHS Direct, not the acute problems caused by the nurses' pay award. Will NHS Direct help my authority, which has received less than 1.7 per cent. growth money, and which has an inflation allowance of 2.5 per cent? The pay award will cost twice that, and the authority's share of the modernisation fund, which is apparently intended to pay for NHS Direct, will cover less than 25 per cent. of the cost.

Many of the Secretary of State's hon. Friends have thanked him for what he has done for their constituencies, but other areas of the country that have enormous demand

are being offered a deaf ear by the Government when they ask how on earth they are to cope. Please will the right hon. Gentleman find a way to assist constituencies such as mine, through NHS Direct or in any other way?

As to the scheme, has the Secretary of State learnt any lessons about the GP practices from which the callers come? Traditionally, many people might have contacted their GP, who has a 24-hour commitment, with their queries. I imagine that the Secretary of State will learn some interesting information about those who make enormous demands on the NHS Direct service and those who use the services of their GP. How will the Secretary of State ensure that there is appropriate feedback about the use of the service and what that reveals about the rest of the NHS?

Mr. Dobson: The right hon. Lady has raised two points. The fact is that, next year, funding to the national health service will increase by 5.7 per cent. in real terms. A substantial chunk of that increase will go to Surrey—although it is true that it will not be as substantial a chunk as would have been allocated under the rigged system that we inherited from the Conservatives. We are trying to target our efforts at the most deprived areas where people are least healthy, which is a wholly laudable priority. The financial officers in the health service in the right hon. Lady's area should not be in despair. If they cannot manage with the money they have, they are not doing a very good job because they are receiving much more funding.

NHS Direct is a perfectly good scheme which was welcomed at its inception by the British Medical Association. Doctors in each area are enthusiastic about it once it is in operation. They have initial doubts about the scheme's likely impact: some are concerned that it will take work away from them and others are concerned that it may add to their work load. If, like her colleagues, the right hon. Lady is an expert on the Wiltshire scheme, she will know that it appeared to reduce GP work loads in Wiltshire. However, we do not know whether that is a typical outcome: it may vary between different parts of the country.

Mr. John Gunnell (Morley and Rothwell): As the calls to NHS Direct will be incoming, will the nurse who responds initially be able to call the patient back if she is concerned about her original advice or the patient's condition? Will she pass on the call to another health service agency or person who will then make that contact?

Mr. Dobson: The person who first receives the call will take a note of telephone numbers, addresses and names. Therefore, either the nurse who gives the advice or some other professional will be in a position to get back to the caller if they have reconsidered their advice or they want to check that everything is okay after several hours. Callers are often advised, "Go to bed and tuck yourself in, and I'll ring back in a few hours to see how you are." It is a very flexible service, which is one reason why it is so popular.

Points of Order

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. My point of order goes to the heart of the rights of Members of Parliament to hold Ministers to account. In October, I tabled questions to every Government Department about the use of RAF and chartered flights. All of them answered, except the Treasury—the Chancellor simply refused to do so. Standing Order No. 22(4), which deals with written questions on a named day, states:

"the Minister shall cause an answer to be given".

I suggest, Madam Speaker, that under Standing Order No. 22, you have the power to insist that the Chancellor answers my question. The Chancellor is blatantly and brazenly refusing to give factual information about his use of public money. In recent days, his taste for chartered jets and helicopters has been leaked and we can see what he has to hide.

If Ministers are allowed to get away with this trick, they will be able to deny information to hon. Members on any subject that they find embarrassing. Madam Speaker, I hope that you can find some way to stop this deplorable practice—otherwise the rights of the House will be seriously eroded.

Madam Speaker: As the hon. Gentleman is aware, I am not responsible for the answers that Ministers give to parliamentary questions. No doubt, those who are currently sitting on the Treasury Bench will have noted his remarks and may well follow through on that issue.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. May I say that I have been a Member of Parliament for 20 years and can refer to thousands of replies of a similar nature that I received from Conservative Ministers, except that they were far more devious? They referred to disproportionate costs. Conservative Ministers did that repeatedly when they did not want to answer questions asked by Labour Members.

Madam Speaker: I have nothing to add to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples).

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): On a different, but related, point of order, Madam Speaker. Is there not a distinction to be made between your not being responsible for the nature, content or quality of an answer being given, and the issue being asked about, which is, as I understand it, that of whether an answer is given at all?

Madam Speaker: An answer has been given—I think that the hon. Gentleman is not quite aware of the situation. I have nothing to add to my earlier comments.

WELSH GRAND COMMITTEE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith pursuant to Standing Order No. 107 (Welsh Grand Committee),

That the matter of transport policy in Wales, being a matter relating exclusively to Wales, be referred to the Welsh Grand Committee for its consideration—*[Mr. Robert Ainsworth.]*

Question agreed to.

Computer Millennium Non-compliance (Contingency Plans)

4.11 pm

Mr. David Atkinson (Bournemouth, East): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require organisations responsible for the provision of essential public services and critical infrastructure to draw up contingency plans in the event of their computer systems failing to deal with calendar dates after 31st December 1999; to require such plans and the names of those responsible for them to be notified to an appropriate authority; to require the plans to be made available on demand; and for connected purposes.

In 1995, in a question to the then Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), I warned of the possible consequences for business and government of the threat to computer systems posed by the failure of most of them to recognise the year 2000. On hearing that, the whole House fell about—I do not suppose that there were many hon. Members then who knew what I was talking about. Today, scarcely a day goes by without a reference to the threat of "Y2K", as the issue is technically called. Today, with only 333 days left, there is growing awareness that not enough has been or can now be done to ensure that the commencement of the new century will be trouble free.

It is true that this country is probably ahead of most others in taking the action necessary to avoid problems. In addition to the measures that my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon told me his Government were taking, in response to my Adjournment debate on the issue in June 1996, the then information technology Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor), announced the establishment of a TaskForce 2000 business awareness campaign. In 1997, the current Government replaced TaskForce 2000 with Action 2000, which last year introduced the millennium bug campaign. In addition, the current Government report quarterly to the House on the progress being made by central Government in tackling the problem.

The Leader of the House made the fourth such statement to the House on 2 December, when in answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) she said that, when she had attended an international conference on the issue, it appeared that this country was much the best prepared. The right hon. Lady also said that we are internationally vulnerable, and she was right to do so. One of the essential messages that everyone needs to understand about this unique issue is that no computer is an island, and no island such as ours can be insulated from the global economy. No matter how well this country is prepared, if our computer systems are linked to others that are not ready, ours will be affected by them.

There is no internationally recognised standard on millennium conformity, or any world test day: I have argued for both of those in the Council of Europe in its role within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Today, there is ample evidence that Japan, much of south-east Asia, China, Russia and many European countries with which we trade, such as Spain, will not be millennium ready. Because there is no longer sufficient time left—let alone sufficient resources available—to ensure that such countries will be ready, the early warnings by experts that there will be a tidal wave of chaos affecting whole economies, commencing where the new millennium first arrives, in the Pacific region, and moving westward with the speed of time, are no longer treated with incredulity.

The same logic applies just as crucially to our economy and the provision of public services. It is truly an all or nothing situation. In a network of computer systems, the chain is as strong as its weakest link. If one system is not compliant, all those with which it is linked are at risk. That is why no one can guarantee that we shall avoid problems at the end of the year. The magnitude of the millennium issue is impossible to quantify. The truth is that no one knows what will happen when Big Ben strikes midnight of the new millennium.

To date, the House has kindly allowed me to introduce two Bills to respond to that issue. Because I did not consider that it would be sufficient to rely on voluntary awareness and action on the part of those in the private sector to ensure that British business would be millennium ready, I introduced the Companies (Millennium Computer Compliance) Bill in 1996 and again in 1997. In March last year, I introduced the Millennium Conformity Bill, which would have required all date-related computer systems to conform to the British Standards Institution code. Neither Bill received the support of the Government of the time.

Today, most experts agree that anyone now waking up to the issue and commencing the time-consuming, painstaking process of essential testing will find that there is not enough time left. That is the view of the head of Action 2000, Gwyneth Flower, who recently said:

"We are too late to have a trouble free transition to the new millennium".

That is why it is now essential to ensure that contingency plans are in place, and especially to ensure that our public services are maintained and that our critical infrastructure makes a seamless transition into the next century. That is the purpose of the Bill that I seek the leave of the House to introduce today. It accords with the advice of the Prime Minister, the Leader of the House, the National Audit Office, Action 2000, TaskForce 2000, the second report of the Select Committee on Science and Technology, the 66th report of the Public Accounts Committee and the second report of the Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs. The difference between their advice and my Bill is that they make exhortations to take voluntary action, whereas my Bill would impose a statutory obligation on those concerned.

Why should that obligation be necessary? As I have already emphasised, voluntary action has not resulted and will not now result in this country being completely millennium ready, so it will not ensure that contingency plans will be in place. The Bill would do more to ensure our protection. It would require organisations responsible for providing essential public services and critical infrastructure to draw up contingency plans to maintain continuity in the event of the failure of the computer systems involved. It would require such plans and those responsible for them to be notified to an appropriate authority and to be made available on demand. Hon. Members from both sides of the House are sponsoring the Bill.

It may be said that such a Bill is unnecessary because existing legislation provides for contingency plans to be drawn up to deal with a wide range of civil emergencies,

from floods to terrorism and from hurricanes to epidemics, and those arrangements are already in place. That is true, but all that legislation is designed to respond to unforeseen events. Such contingency plans are broadly designed to respond to a variety of situations and, conventionally, to counter physical failures. Year 2000 problems are not a physical failure; they are a logical failure.

It is not well understood that all conventional forms of contingency and disaster recovery planning for information technology systems will not work for year 2000 projects. New forms of contingency plans will be needed. Moreover, existing legislation does not provide for business risk scenarios, and existing private sector contingency plans are also unlikely to be appropriate for potential millennium emergencies.

Unlike most emergency situations, the threat of the millennium bug is utterly predictable in its timing. It will begin to affect non-compliant, date-related computer systems from midnight of the first day of the new century—either with immediate effect or after a period, according to what the computers have been programmed to do. That is a threat on which we can legislate precisely.

My Bill calls for contingency plans to respond precisely to the performance of computer systems. It is confined to those that provide essential public services and infrastructure that is critical to our nation. If passed, it would do much to ensure minimum interruption in our daily lives and the protection of the most vulnerable people. Without such precise legislation in response to such a predictable and unique threat, a growing mood of uncertainty and alarm may develop over the year, altering the behaviour of the public and financial markets. We still have time to avoid that scenario; that is what my Bill will do.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. David Atkinson, Mr. David Amess, Mr. Frank Cook, Mr. Tam Dalyell, Dr. Lynne Jones, Mr. Nigel Jones, Mr. Charles Kennedy, Mr. Robert Sheldon, Rev. Martin Smyth, Dr. Rudi Vis, Mr. John Townend and Mr. Dafydd Wigley.

Computer Millennium Non-compliance (Contingency Plans)

Mr. David Atkinson accordingly presented a Bill to require organisations responsible for the provision of essential public services and critical infrastructure to draw up contingency plans in the event of their computer systems failing to deal with calendar dates after 31st December 1999; to require such plans and the names of those responsible for them to be notified to an appropriate authority; to require the plans to be made available on demand; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 26 February, and to be printed [Bill 39].

Point of Order

4.22 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. You will have noticed the fine body of parliamentary persons who sponsor the Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Atkinson). By dint of queueing, I promoted a ten-minute Bill last Tuesday. Parts of my speech were played on "The World This Weekend". I was put out when asked on that programme which Minister listened to my speech, because no Minister, either from the Ministry of Defence or the Foreign Office, was on the Front Bench to do so. I noticed that there was no one from the Department of Trade and Industry to listen to the hon. Gentleman's speech today. I shall be very blunt: if the Government of the day had listened years ago to the House of Commons and the hon. Gentleman when he promoted his previous Bills—I served on the Committee that considered one of them—we would not be in the bloody mess that we are today about the millennium bug. That applies to both Governments concerned.

Madam Speaker: That is barely a point of order. I see on the Front Bench not only the Leader of the House, who is responsible for the subject of the ten-minute Bill, but a galaxy of Ministers, all of whom I know share some responsibility for the subject.

Orders of the Day

House of Lords Bill

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on amendment to Question [1 February], That the Bill be now read a Second Time.

Which amendment was, to leave out from "That" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"this House declines to give a Second Reading to the House of Lords Bill as it fails to address the role of the Second Chamber, its relationship to this House and its long term composition and hence, rather than improving the governance of the United Kingdom by establishing a sustainable, balanced and effective constitution, it merely adds to the incoherence of Her Majesty's Government's piecemeal constitutional changes."—[*Dr Fox.*]

Question again proposed, That the amendment be made.

4.23 pm

The Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): I quote:

"The idea of hereditary legislation is as inconsistent as that of hereditary judges, or hereditary juries; and as absurd as an hereditary mathematician, or an hereditary wise man, and as ridiculous as an hereditary poet-laureate".

When Tom Paine wrote that in "The Rights of Man", which was first published in the early part of February 1791, he could scarcely have imagined that, almost exactly 208 years later, his criticism of the hereditary Members of the House of Lords would still be relevant, and would still be opposed by the Conservatives.

What exactly is the Conservatives' view of the hereditary principle in the legislature? Even after careful scrutiny of the speeches that they made yesterday, it is difficult to say with any confidence. Indeed, the Conservatives still seem to believe that membership of the legislature should be determined by what happened in a previous lifetime. The only other person who seems to believe in that principle is the England football manager. Perhaps the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) is already exhausted by the unequal struggle of trying to reconcile the conflicting wings of his team, and is even now sending his application to be the next England manager. He will plan, no doubt, to select a hereditary England football team, presumably with lots of players on the right wing, little ability up front, and an open goal at the back.

My hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Mr. Hope) did sterling service for the House yesterday in seeking to establish precisely the views of the Conservatives on the hereditary principle. In his opening speech, the hon. Member for Woodspring stated:

"We have made it perfectly clear that the hereditary principle in itself is not something that we challenge."—[*Official Report*, 1 February 1999; Vol. 324, c. 620.]

However, in winding up, the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) stated that the Conservatives did not oppose the abolition of the hereditary peers' right to vote, in principle. We are growing accustomed to the Conservatives changing their policies from day to day, but we shall have to get used to them changing their principles from hour to hour.

I shall give the Conservatives an opportunity now to dispel our doubts. In a few weeks they will have the chance to make their views known to the royal commission. I look forward to hearing whether they will propose retaining a hereditary element for the future, long-term composition of the House of Lords.

I welcome the Conservatives' recent conversion to the cause of constitutional change. We did not hear a great deal about that during their 18 years in government. Indeed, the boast of the hon. Member for West Dorset last night that the Conservatives will make serious and radical proposals for reform, not only of the House of Lords but of the constitution of Parliament as a whole, sits uncomfortably with the Conservative manifesto on which he was elected. At page 49 the manifesto dismisses the need for radical change, and at page 50 it states:

"We do not believe there is a case for more radical reform".

The hon. Member for Woodspring, perhaps unconsciously, gave away the real reason for his conversion to the cause of radical constitutional change, when he said that we needed a stronger Parliament because of all the different trends that had emerged in our recent history. I suspect that his grasp of recent history stretches all the way back to the early hours of 2 May 1997, when a radically different trend among the electorate produced a radically different Government.

Since "The Rights of Man" was published, there has been a series of unsuccessful attempts to reform the House of Lords. The Roseberry proposals of 1908 were drawn up by a Committee of the House of Lords chaired by Lord Roseberry. The Committee concluded

"at an early stage in their proceedings"

that

"it was undesirable that the possession of a Peerage should of itself give the right to sit and vote in the House of Lords, and that the dignity of a peer and of a Lord of Parliament should be separated".

In March 1910, the House of Commons passed by 175 votes to 17 a resolution accepting that

"a necessary preliminary of reform and reconstitution is the acceptance of the principle that the possession of a peerage should no longer of itself give the right to sit and vote in the House of Lords".

I repeat:

"a necessary preliminary of reform".

The 1917 Bryce conference was the first serious attempt to develop the preamble to the 1911 Act that

"it is intended to substitute for the House of Lords as it at present exists a Second Chamber constituted on a popular instead of hereditary basis".

It proposed that the membership of the hereditary peerage would gradually be phased out, with the existing peers electing a reducing number of seats in the House. The justification for retaining the rapidly reducing hereditary element was to provide continuity with the existing House of Lords.

The 1948 party leaders' conference was called to discuss the possibility that a more comprehensive reform of the powers and composition of the House of Lords could be achieved. It was agreed that

"the present right to attend and vote based solely on heredity should not by itself constitute a qualification for admission to a reformed second chamber".

Instead, personal distinction and public service should be the criteria, to be applied to the hereditary peerage in the same way as to everyone else.

The 1968 proposals had their origins in a joint committee of Labour and Conservatives, to which official support was given, with its inspiration coming from

Richard Crossman. The proposals had largely been agreed when co-operation broke down between the two sides over the Lords' rejection of the Rhodesian sanctions order. As a result, they were published in a White Paper in the name of the Government alone. However, hon. Members on the Conservative Opposition Front Bench in the Commons spoke in favour of the ideas when the White Paper was debated in the Commons. In the other place, the White Paper was approved by 251 votes to 56, including a majority of 108 to 43 among Conservative Peers.

It was agreed, in principle, that the hereditary peerage, and the in-built Conservative bias that resulted, undermined the legitimacy of the House of Lords. In volume 2 of his diaries, Dick Crossman wrote of the all-party consultations at the time:

"We really got an astonishing amount of agreement in a very short time. It is clear that the Tories and the Liberals really believe in a House of life peers . . . the vital thing is that they are willing to abandon the hereditary principle as a reason for membership of the reformed House of Lords".

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): I am grateful to the Minister for the excellent history lesson that he is giving us on the previous proposals. Does he agree that the failure in all those systems was that nobody agreed on how we would end up with a better House of Lords, a better second Chamber or, indeed, no second Chamber? It is wholly wrong for the Government to try to achieve reform in two bites, instead of introducing proposals that had been accepted by hon. Members on both sides of the House and achieving reform in one go. Why are the Government carrying on with this illogical proposal?

Mr. Hoon: The proposal is not illogical, and if the hon. Gentleman will bear with me for a few minutes, I will deal with his point in my brief description of the history of it.

The 1968 White Paper stated unequivocally that

"succession to a hereditary peerage would no longer confer membership of the House of Lords".

It was proposed that existing hereditary peers could keep their seats, but not their voting rights. Their heirs would have no rights at all. What sank those proposals was their complexity, together with the decision by the Conservative Opposition to withdraw their support. The proposals were so complex that there were an almost infinite number of issues on which it was possible to delay progress.

It is clear that, in each of those efforts at reform, it was assumed that the inheritance of a peerage would no longer automatically give the right to attend and vote on legislation in the House of Lords. Each time, the complexity of those comprehensive packages led to difficulty and to eventual defeat. Although the key elements of the reform proposals—the need for a revising second Chamber, the extent of their lordships powers and the overriding need to remove the rights of hereditary peers—received widespread support, the minority opponents of each element combined to defeat the whole. That is why this Government's step-by-step approach is such a sensible and pragmatic way of achieving reform.

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): To add to what my hon. Friend was saying about the situation in 1968 and 1969, the objection was that we would create a massive amount of patronage. It was obvious that the Conservatives were quite prepared to exchange principle for power, as they saw it. We would have had an aldermanic Bench: people would have gone to the other House and received pay without having to fear elections. That stimulated Enoch Powell, Michael Foot and, to a certain extent, me to act.

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his observations. I have started to read one of his speeches from those debates, but he will forgive me for not having yet completed it. The Government have clearly sought to address those observations in the package of proposals in the White Paper.

The pragmatic approach that I have described was deployed by a Conservative Government, who proposed and passed the Life Peerages Act 1958. The purpose of that Bill, as described by Lord Home in the other place, was to

"propose reforms which would lead to the greater efficiency of this House and therefore for the better working of Parliament, and which would bring this House more nearly abreast of the times".

That was an entirely pragmatic proposal, taken forward by a Conservative Government. It was a single-step reform, which was required to improve the legislative process.

Lord Home further explained that the 1958 Act dealt only with the life peers, and not the other matters which were being pressed on the Government, because

"we are convinced, after the lesson of fifty years, that if we try to get more we shall end up getting nothing at all."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 3 December 1957; Vol. 206, c. 610-13.]

Quintin Hogg, then Lord President of the Council, added that

"it ill becomes those who have deliberately decided to do nothing to taunt those who have decided to do something on the grounds that what they have decided to do is too little."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 5 December 1957; Vol. 206, c. 845.]

That certainly seems to be an entirely accurate summary of the present Conservative criticism of this Bill.

The then Lord Chancellor said:

"on no fewer than ten occasions during that period of one hundred years have unsuccessful attempts been made to alter the law . . . all unsuccessful because someone had forgotten that the best can so often be the enemy of the good."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 5 December 1957; Vol. 206, c. 936.]

If a Conservative Government were right in 1958 to deal with the creation of life peerages in a pragmatic, single-step reform, why should it be wrong today for a Labour Government, implementing a specific manifesto pledge, to seek to remove in a first stage the rights of hereditary peers to vote?

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): On that manifesto pledge, my hon. Friend will recall that the manifesto specifically said that there would be a Joint Committee of both Houses in relation to the second stage, and used the words "to bring forward proposals". I know that there will be a royal commission, and I am told that a Joint Committee will sit after the royal commission. Will my hon. Friend put some beef on what, exactly, will be the procedure for the Joint Committee? Will it be able to reject the proposals of the royal commission and will it have a time scale? What are the rubrics for that Joint Committee coming forward with what our manifesto described as proposals for the second stage?

Mr. Hoon: For technical reasons, the Joint Committee cannot meet until the Bill has passed through Parliament.

[Mr. Hoon]

It will consider the parliamentary implications of any recommendations that are made by the royal commission. There will be a two-stage process: the royal commission will consider ideas in a general way, and will then put them to the Joint Committee, which will examine the specific implications for Parliament, both here and in the other place. Its suggestions will then have to be put before Parliament, which will legislate if necessary.

Mr. Mackinlay: What about the time scale?

Mr. Hoon: I shall deal with that in due course, when I have looked at the proposals for the transitional House.

I want to emphasise one point. If the Conservatives' main argument—perhaps their only argument—

Mr. John Major (Huntingdon): I thank the Minister for giving way. It is most courteous of him.

The hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) has made an important point. After the royal commission has reported, its report will go to a Committee of both Houses. I consider that entirely proper, as Parliament itself is sovereign. Can the Minister assure me that the Committee will have an opportunity, if it wishes, to object to, reject or change the commission's proposals, and that, if that is the case, the Government will not automatically cast aside the Committee's views, but will recognise that Parliament will wish to have its say in what the reform is? Can I be assured that Parliament will not necessarily rubber-stamp the work of a royal commission whose members have been appointed by the Government?

Mr. Hoon: The right hon. Gentleman has, in a sense, answered his own question. It is clear that, ultimately, Parliament must decide on the recommendations of either the royal commission or the Joint Committee. It will be for Parliament to legislate, if legislation proves necessary—as it is likely to, given the likelihood of a fundamental change in the way in which legislation is passed.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): I hope that the Minister will be as helpful to me as he was to the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major). At what point might the Government wish to indicate their view—before the Joint Committee sits, or during its hearings? Certainly, we shall not learn about the Government's position during the consideration of the royal commission.

Mr. Hoon: It may not be entirely appropriate for me to say at this stage what the Government's position might be, but I assure the right hon. Gentleman that Labour and other political parties are very likely to want to make their views known. That may give him some idea of Labour's thinking.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): The Minister's reply to my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) was a little disingenuous. Did he mean that the Government would not have their own view—that the Government would not whip their troops? Will the Government allow Parliament truly to make a decision on this matter?

Mr. Hoon: Parliament always truly makes a decision on any matter. I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman should make such an observation, given his long experience of the ways in which this place works.

Mr. Major: I am sorry to pursue my point, but it is a genuine point, and I think the Minister may not have understood precisely what I was saying.

When the royal commission's report goes to a Joint Committee of Members of both Houses and, presumably, from all parties, the Committee will doubtless make specific recommendations. Of course Parliament decides; the question is, will Parliament decide on the Joint Committee's recommendations on a free vote, or will the Government, having made up their own mind, determine—using their large majority—to overrule Joint Committee views that may not be the views of the royal commission?

Mr. Hoon: The right hon. Gentleman tempts me too far down a road leading to something that is still in the future. Although we have clearly indicated the importance of the royal commission reporting quickly—I will deal with that later if I have time—we have also indicated that we would encourage the Joint Committee to resolve its responsibilities in terms of the parliamentary implications of any royal commission suggestions. Obviously, it is important ultimately that Parliament does decide, and it will be a matter for Parliament.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): Does my hon. Friend understand the difficulty that faces the Government? The Bill is a simple one and no Labour Member would dispute it, but the new House coming out of the deliberations of the royal commission and the Joint Committee will be immensely complex. The fear of many people—I am one of them—is that the transitional deal that will preserve hereditary peers will become the permanent solution. With the Bill itself, we do not know what the Government view is, but we do know that the process will involve the most complex legislation. It could be so complicated that we end up with hereditary peers electing each other—and we have not even fulfilled the manifesto commitment.

Mr. Hoon: I have already made it clear that the Government take the view that the royal commission should report as soon as possible—by the end of this year if it can do so. That is a tight timetable for a royal commission, but it follows from that that the Government are determined that there should be a second stage. We have set that out clearly in the White Paper, but may I add this? My right hon. Friend and I were both elected on a specific manifesto commitment to remove the right of hereditary peers—

Mr. Benn: All hereditary peers.

Mr. Hoon: —of all hereditary peers—to vote. Of course, what we propose, which is contained in the Bill, is designed to achieve precisely that, so the Government have an interest in delivering the manifesto commitment

on which Labour Members were elected. Therefore, there is no reason why we should want a transitional House to last any longer than it absolutely has to.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hoon: No. I must make progress. I have given way on a considerable number of occasions. I was hoping to demonstrate how important it is to analyse what precisely the objection of Conservative Members is to the Bill. We had a good deal of debate yesterday and I regret to say that their objections did not become particularly clear.

I hope that Conservative Members will not object too strongly if I suggest that there are some suspicions about their real motives in arguing for the reasoned amendment. Are they genuinely in favour of profound constitutional change, or are they simply using the amendment as a fig leaf to hide the embarrassing fact that they have little idea whether they are for or against the hereditary principle?

The suspicion must be that the Conservatives are using the reasoned amendment to frustrate not simply the particular change in the Bill, but any change in the composition of the House of Lords. It is they who want to kick reform into the long grass.

In contrast, the present Government set out clearly in their manifesto not only their principled position, but the means for achieving their goal. The Government are fulfilling their manifesto commitment. A Joint Committee of both Houses will be appointed to take forward the proposals of the royal commission, which has been established to ensure the widest possible public debate. In analysing the options, the royal commission has been given clear terms of reference.

The royal commission is to report by 31 December 1999. The tight timetable will provide for its recommendations to be completed in sufficient time for the Government to respond to them in advance of the next general election. It demonstrates the Government's seriousness and sense of purpose in moving forward towards a full reform of the second Chamber. Once the royal commission has reported, the Government will establish the proposed Joint Committee of both Houses of Parliament to examine the parliamentary implications of the commission's report. It, too, will be asked to work to a tight timetable.

The time limit is much shorter than for most royal commissions, notwithstanding the need for the widest possible public debate and the need to find consensus.

Mr. Nicholls: The hon. Gentleman has been generous in giving way, but, equally, he will appreciate that it is a most important matter. Everything that he has said so far concerns the composition of the upper House. Have the Government any idea at all what they want the function of the upper House to be because, if they change one House, they are bound to change the other?

Mr. Hoon: For reasons of brevity, I skipped over the terms of reference for the royal commission. The hon. Gentleman can find them in the White Paper, but they briefly are:

"to consider and make recommendations on the role and functions of a second chamber; and

to make recommendations on the method or combination of methods of composition required to constitute a second chamber fit for that role and those functions."

Very clear guidance has been given to the royal commission on the matters on which we should like it to achieve consensus. Equally, we have to realise that the commissioners must be free to make proposals that can achieve consensus and command the support of the country at large. We hope that they will be able to do precisely that by the end of the year.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): The idea of a royal commission was first announced in July, by Baroness Jay, in another place. We have now had an announcement on the royal commission's chairmanship. When will the Government be able to tell us the size of the commission and who the other commissioners will be?

Mr. Hoon: We shall announce those details in due course. I anticipate that it will not be a large royal commission. We want to ensure not only that the widest possible view is reflected in the commission's membership, but that the commissioners are few enough to be able to get on with doing their important work in a short time scale.

Mr. Mackinlay: I should like to clarify one point with my hon. Friend. He keeps saying that the Joint Committee will consider the "parliamentary implications". However, our manifesto did not say that—it said that the Committee would make proposals. Will my hon. Friend flesh out both the implications of our manifesto commitment and his definition of a "tight time scale" for the Committee?

Mr. Hoon: The Committee will make proposals based on the parliamentary implications of the royal commission's recommendations. I cannot do any better than that in answering my hon. Friend's question. That will be the role of the Joint Committee, which will follow the findings of the royal commission and make recommendations to the House, on which my hon. Friend and all other hon. Members will have an opportunity to comment.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): The Minister said that the names of those to serve on the royal commission will be announced shortly. Will the Government be consulting the Conservative party on a Conservative nominee to serve on the commission?

Mr. Hoon: The Conservative party is already well represented on the royal commission, and I am sure that Conservative Members will be delighted by the names of those who fill the other places.

Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House briefly mentioned the package of measures for the transitional House of Lords which have not been included in the Bill, because they are temporary administrative matters. However, they are an important and integral part of our proposals, and it is right that I should deal with them in more detail.

The Conservative party continues to maintain that our intention must be to create a "House of Patronage". Undoubtedly, from experience, they are aware of the potential for partiality in the exercise of the current powers of the Prime Minister to control access to honours. From 1979 to 1997, the Conservatives created 173 Conservative peerages to only 96 Labour ones. Excluding

[Mr. Hoon]

resignation and dissolution honours, the figures were 126 to 59. That imbalance added to the already dominant Conservative representation in the House of Lords.

The new Government's position is radically different. We have consistently made it clear that we do not intend the transitional House of Lords to be one that is under the Government's control. Our manifesto was explicit on that point: we said that no one party should seek a majority in the House of Lords. Are the Conservatives able to commit themselves unequivocally to supporting a second Chamber in which no single party should have a majority? If they are, what action are they willing to take to achieve such a Chamber?

We have also made it clear that the system of appointment of life peers will be reviewed. We have committed ourselves to maintaining an independent Cross-Bench presence of life peers. We have said that, over time, the number of party appointees should more accurately reflect the votes cast at the preceding general election. We shall deliver on those promises.

There are three elements to our proposals: first, the principle that will help to determine numbers in the transitional House of Lords; secondly, introduction of an independent appointments commission to nominate Cross-Bench peers; and, thirdly, the undertaking to forward to the Queen without interference the recommendations of other party leaders and the commission.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hoon: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I must make progress.

I shall deal, first, with the principle. We have publicly committed ourselves not to seek more than broad parity between the Government and the main Opposition party. Consistency with our manifesto would have allowed us to seek about 40 per cent. more seats than the Conservatives have in the other place. We have, therefore, gone much further in restraining the Prime Minister's powers than we had to. Consistent with our commitment to maintain an independent Cross-Bench presence, we have undertaken to allow peers to be created in proportion to the numbers of the other parties.

Secondly, the appointments commission will be an advisory, non-departmental public body. As such, it will be accountable to Parliament, through Ministers, in the usual way. That answers one of the points raised yesterday by the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell). The Prime Minister will relinquish entirely his power to recommend nominations to the Cross Benches, giving up that power to an independent appointments commission. There are two important aspects of this to draw to the House's attention. The first is that the very act of setting up the commission is an indication of the Government's continuing commitment to the retention of independent Members of the House of Lords. The second is the reduction in patronage that will follow.

The commission will be set up later this year. It will begin to operate when the transitional House comes into existence. It will include members of the three main parties, together with a majority of independent members. The appointment of the independent members will be "Nolanised" in accordance with the relevant rules of the Commissioner for Public Appointments. As those rules were drawn up under the previous Government, I am sure that Opposition Members will not be tempted to claim that the body in question will not be properly independent.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Exactly how are they to be "Nolanised"? What will be the process?

Mr. Hoon: The appointments will be subject to precisely the procedures that the Nolan Committee expects such bodies to use—right hon. and hon. Members are becoming familiar with those procedures.

The appointments commission will be encouraged to seek nominations from a wide field, and will be able to consider nominations from members of the public. It will take over the role of the Political Honours Scrutiny Committee in vetting all peerage nominations for propriety, for example to ensure that they are not proposed in return for party donations instead of public service. That, after all, is how we came by so many hereditary peers earlier this century.

Thirdly, control over names will be relinquished. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has committed himself not to interfere in the detail of other parties' nominations. Within the agreed numbers, and subject to approval by the appointments commission, the Prime Minister will pass on any names submitted to him by the other political parties.

Taking the Government's proposals together, the Prime Minister will in future have less influence than any of his predecessors over appointments and over the composition of the House of Lords.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way as I wish to raise an important point. Does what he has just said mean that the Prime Minister will have ultimate control over who is appointed to the commission? Everybody who is appointed to the commission is bound to have a political view, so how will the political balance be maintained?

Mr. Hoon: On the contrary, the position is precisely the opposite. As we set out in the White Paper, the chairman will be an entirely independent figure.

The question was raised yesterday about what guarantees the Government could give that the transitional arrangements would actually be put in place. Having set out commitments for a transitional House in our White Paper, it seems clear that, if we had then included them in the Bill, we would have been accused of wanting to make the transitional House permanent. Our intention is to move on from the transitional House as soon as we can. The Government were elected on a clear and unequivocal commitment to reform the House of Lords, with a specific first stage of ending the rights of hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House of Lords.

Whenever efforts have been made previously to remove the hereditary peers' rights to sit and vote, and at the same time to deal with the powers and the composition of the House of Lords, they have failed. Taking the process step by step makes it more, not less, likely that real reform will actually take place. Removing the hereditary peers first removes a first real obstacle to reform and change.

The Government are carrying out their promise as part of their wider constitutional reform programme because the House of Lords as presently constituted is an outdated relic. Its reform is long overdue and reform is essential if we are to create a modern constitutional democracy. Only after the removal of the hereditary peers can we create a modern Parliament for a modern Britain.

4.54 pm

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): To follow the Minister's Glenn Hoddle analogy, I am not sure what he did in a previous life, but it must have been quite dreadful for him to be given today's hot potato.

In opening the debate for the official Opposition, let me first pay tribute to the dedication and commitment of the many hereditary and life peers who have served Parliament well—the life peers since 1958 and the hereditary peers over several centuries. I know that the Leader of the House meant to say that yesterday, but she inadvertently completely omitted it from her speech.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): Does that extend to the 200 hereditary peers who could not be bothered to turn up in the last Session?

Mr. Evans: I was paying tribute to those who had given great service, dedication and commitment. If the hon. Gentleman looks at the attendance record of some of the life peers—even some appointed by the current Prime Minister—he will find it wanting.

At a recent conference on Lords reform, the Liberal Democrat peer Lord McNally spoke of the difficulty of getting life peers to serve on the Channel Tunnel Rail Link Bill Committee in 1996. Only one life peer served on the Committee, to six hereditary peers.

I enjoyed hearing the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) referring yesterday to the modernising policy of previous Administrations. Even the introduction of the hereditary principle for peerages was a modernising move at the time. The right hon. Gentleman pointed out that, even after the passage of the Bill, the second Chamber will lack democratic authority. The White Paper refers to all sorts of mechanisms to determine the composition of the future House of Lords and talks specifically about the down side of having a body that is wholly democratically elected.

There is no perfect model that would suit all systems of government. As hon. Members have pointed out, the composition depends on what we want the second Chamber to do. The Government have already decided, in the remit that they have given the royal commission, that this Chamber should remain the pre-eminent Chamber of Parliament, so they do not want a solely elected second Chamber. The new House will want to use all the powers at its disposal and may demand more, depending on how often its elections are and what form of electoral system is used if there is an elected element.

The unfinished business of 1911 will remain unfinished if the Bill is enacted. It leaves too many unanswered questions. The manifesto commitment has already been sacrificed. The Labour manifesto "New Labour Because Britain Deserves Better"—pause for laughter—says:

> "As an initial, self-contained reform, not dependent on further reform in the future, the right of hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House of Lords will be ended by statute."

So much for that promise, because we have already moved to a two-stage process.

Will the new House be more democratic? As the right hon. Member for Chesterfield said clearly yesterday, the answer is no. Leaving a House of nominated peers is not more democratic, as Viscount Cranborne said during a conference on the future of the House of Lords last year. He said:

> "Why is it that a nominated peer is more democratic than an hereditary peer? I would say that neither of them is particularly democratic, but at least people like me do not owe our places to the living, but merely to the long dead."

Mr. Nigel Beard (Bexleyheath and Crayford) *rose—*

Mr. Evans: Talking of which.

Mr. Beard: The House of Lords has consisted of hereditary peers and life peers for 40 years. I have never heard the Conservatives question its legitimacy. Do they believe that the hereditary peers gave the House of Lords a mark of respectability that will be removed when it is left with people who are nominated for what they have done during their life time?

Mr. Evans: Viscount Cranborne put it succinctly. Why should a House full of nominated peers who owe their positions to the current Prime Minister and previous Prime Ministers—I think that the White Paper mentions eight—be any more democratic than the current House? We are not arguing for the preservation of the second Chamber as it is currently constituted. In his tour de force covering historical approaches to such reforms, the Minister said that the Conservative Front Bench supported the 1968 proposals to remove the hereditary principle. We are not arguing with that. We simply want a more effective approach to the reform of the second Chamber.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that Viscount Cranborne was slightly in error, since he, alone of all Members of the House of Lords, owes his place to somebody who is still living—his father? I believe that Viscount Cranborne is a peer by accelerated succession, which means that he has his place by virtue of one of the extra titles that his father is not using. Was not the hon. Gentleman wrong? *[Laughter.]*

Mr. Evans: Hon. Members may still be laughing at my reference to Labour's manifesto. However, the point is well made. The Chamber will be no more democratic if peers are nominated by the current Prime Minister or previous Prime Ministers than if they are there by dint of birth. We are looking for something that is far more effective, and we are not getting that with the proposed reform.

Yesterday, the Leader of the House referred to the Bill as simple. She should not confuse short with simple, because the intention behind the Bill makes it radical, and that intention is to shift more powers to the Executive. The Executive have already enjoyed an increase in the

[Mr. Evans]

payroll over the past 40 years. The Executive constantly sideline the House in the presentation of policy, and use patronage and the stick over their Members to ruthless effect. We have Government by pager, supported by compliant, drip-fed Members of Parliament and abetted by the Liberal Democrats, who are no longer members of the Opposition but part of a coalition.

The coalition is led by a Prime Minister who is prepared to bypass the newspapers—which are only interested in tittle-tattle and trivia—to speak to the nation on the Richard and Judy show about Humphrey the cat, football and life at No. 10. No doubt the next stop for the Prime Minister's assault on serious political messages will be the next edition of *Hello!* magazine.

The Lords have been regularly chastised by the Prime Minister and his obedient followers at Prime Minister's questions. If the Lords dared to do their job, if they scrutinised legislation—and improved it, on certain occasions—and if they called on this House to think again when the legislation was sufficiently bad, their very existence was threatened.

The Bill is all about further enhancing the powers of the Executive. The so-called modernising of the House of Commons—half an hour of questions on a Wednesday, everybody home early on Thursdays, constituency weeks for Members—has nothing to do with keeping the Executive in check and everything to do with keeping Back Benchers in the dark.

We have a presidential style—as the right hon. Member for Chesterfield said yesterday—but without the checks and balances. Any reform of the second Chamber should have at its core the improvement of Parliament's work. The proposed reform does not do that. The Conservative party is not tied to the second Chamber as it is at present constituted. Indeed, many attempts at reform have been made by both parties. Viscount Cranborne stated:

> "We would go quietly if a properly independent chamber takes our place. To be asked to go without that guarantee is to be asked to connive at the final victory of the executive over Parliament."

Mr. Mackinlay: I have listened to the hon. Gentleman with care, and he is being mealy-mouthed. Why do not the Opposition come out unequivocally—I would welcome it—for a democratically elected upper House, on a different basis from this House?

Mr. Evans: There are many ways in which we could go forward. We set up a commission under Lord Mackay to look into the various options, and Viscount Cranborne asked Lord Richard, when he was Leader of the House of Lords, to come forward with an options paper. If the Government were serious about proper reform, and about a consensual approach, they would have set up the royal commission 20 months ago. The fact is that they did not, and we are now being offered a cobbled-together, two-stage deal. I will have a little more to say on that deal, and the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) may agree with me.

Mr. Martin Linton (Battersea): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that even a peer nominated by the Prime Minister in the interim, transitional House has more right to sit in the Parliament of this country than Lord Cranborne, whose only claim to be in the House of Lords is that he is the great-great-great-great-grandson of one of Elizabeth I's Ministers, Robert Cecil—who was, many think, the original "Blackadder"?

Mr. Evans: Perhaps one of the Whips could have a word with the hon. Gentleman, as he has clearly not been listening to the debate. I have already been chastised for the fact that Viscount Cranborne was appointed as the nominee of a former Prime Minister. Neither method of appointment is democratic, as the hon. Member for Thurrock suggested. We need to investigate ways of getting a more effective second Chamber, so we must consider its functions. The royal commission should have been sitting 20 months ago. If the Government had set it up as soon as they were elected, it would have reported by now and we would have been able to reform the second Chamber in one stage, instead of which we have two-stage proposals—and many of us believe that we may never even get to the second stage.

Mr. Nicholls: Will my hon. Friend help to protect the credentials of my noble Friend Lord Cranborne as an appointee? Does not the real reason why he does not have to wait until his father's death lie in the fact that my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) had him elevated in the peerage of Lord Cecil of Essenden? He is a genuine appointee.

Mr. Evans: That is the point I was trying to make—obviously rather poorly—and my hon. Friend makes it better than I ever could.

Instead of considered reform, bringing into balance the various arms of government and ensuring proper and full scrutiny of legislation, we are offered this two-stage exercise. My hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) was absolutely right yesterday when he said that, after the next general election, the new Parliament will not even know the structure in which it is supposed to operate.

The reform follows other constitutional changes, none of which is yet operational. We will have the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, with new voting systems; European elections under a different form of voting, with the closed-list system giving more power to the parties; a London mayor and assembly; and a Europe demanding more powers, with co-ordination. We have to use the word "co-ordination" because we are not allowed to use the word "harmonisation", just in case people twig what is happening in the European Union.

In an interview with the *Financial Times*, Baroness Jay referred to the House of Lords reform as part of a jigsaw, but the trouble with jigsaws is that pieces go missing, especially when they are all thrown in the air at the same time, as is happening now.

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): Regardless of whether it is done in one or two stages, does the Conservative party favour changing the composition of the House of Lords?

Mr. Evans: My hon. Friends and I have already said that we would favour a reform of the second Chamber; we do not expect hereditary peers to be part of the royal commission's proposals and we would not seek to

reintroduce them. We have made it absolutely clear that we have broken with the past on the hereditary principle for our second Chamber. I cannot be any clearer than that.

If only we had had the royal commission up and running. We all want an effective Parliament with effective scrutiny from the second Chamber. If the Government had set up the commission at the outset, we could have been considering its proposals in detail, instead of which we have a halfway house that will not be for the better government of the country. Many of us still fear that we will not get beyond stage 1.

Mr. Clive Soley (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush): We are pursuing this point because we do not have clarity from the Opposition. It is perfectly reasonable to ask whether, if the Conservative party were in government—or if it were only 18 months to two years ago, when that party was indeed in government—it would have argued and voted for the abolition of the right of hereditary peers to vote in the House of Lords. The answer must be yes or no.

Mr. Evans: The hon. Gentleman asked that question yesterday. I refer him to *Hansard*. My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) said:

"Will he accept this perfectly clear statement from the Opposition; that there is not a chance in hell of the Opposition proposing the resurrection of more hereditary peers than will already have been put in that House by the Government?"—[*Official Report*, 1 February 1999; Vol. 324, c. 654.]

We have no intention of reintroducting them. When we were elected in 1979, the matter was not a priority for us, because we were too busy clearing up the mess that we inherited from the previous Government.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Evans: No. It is wonderful to have all these smoke signals from Walworth road, but I must now make some progress.

The Government should learn that the constitution of this country is not like Cardiff Arms park, which can be flattened and rebuilt at a different angle, bigger and better than before. Even with all the problems that Cardiff Arms park has had, at least it has had an architect who knew what he was doing, unlike the architect of the current reforms, who does not see the bigger picture because he is concentrating on each part.

On the problem of the Scottish Parliament and the West Lothian question, for instance, all we are told is that there will be a reduced number of Scottish Members of Parliament after the next general election. The Scottish Parliament was supposed to be the answer to the rising tide of nationalism, but, since its announcement, support for the nationalists has risen.

We do not know what the arrangements for the Welsh Assembly will be and it is leaderless as far as the Labour party is concerned. Indeed, the Prime Minister, who should be in the Chamber to listen to this debate, is in Wales to support his Secretary of State for Wales, because he does not trust his party to put in the right candidate.

Under the European list system, for the first time in our history people will go into polling booths and will have to vote for a party, not an individual candidate. That is another constitutional change.

The White Paper describes the remit for the royal commission, when devising the second Chamber, in these terms:

"Having regard to the need to maintain the position of the House of Commons as the pre-eminent chamber of Parliament and taking particular account of the present nature of the constitutional settlement, including the newly devolved institutions, the impact of the Human Rights Act and developing relations with the European Union".

However, the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament will not start until July. Given the Christmas and summer recesses and the fact that the bodies will not work a five-day week, the royal commission will have little chance to see how the devolved bodies work and what sort of relationship they should have with this House.

Viscount Cranborne asked for a bedding-down period for the devolved bodies to reflect on how they will interact with this House, but we have not been given that opportunity.

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge–Brownhills): We are now nearly two years into a Labour Government. The proposal for the abolition of the House of Lords has been on the table all that time and it was a manifesto commitment. Is my hon. Friend not able to give the views of the Conservative party on the constitutional reform of Parliament? We will have to make representations to a royal commission in a matter of weeks and, therefore, it is not unreasonable that we should stand up today and say what we believe in.

Mr. Evans: I accept what my hon. Friend says, and we wish to see any reform of the second Chamber as part of a whole-picture reform of Parliament. I will talk later about the need for a more effective House of Commons to provide a check on the Executive. An effective second Chamber must also be part of keeping the Executive under check. We will make representations to the royal commission, but we will do so in terms of how we wish to see Parliament being settled after the reforms are implemented.

The Labour-dominated Scottish Affairs Committee recently stated:

"As far as we can see the Constitutional Reform is being conceived piecemeal. If there is an overall blue-print showing how all the pieces fit together none of our witnesses were aware of it. As Mr. Barnes put it, 'What the Government has done is to set free 2 devolved assemblies without thinking how the relationship between them is structured.'"

That is even without the English dimension being taken into account. The West Lothian question has been acknowledged but not addressed by this Government, and now they are talking about introducing a structured version of the West Lothian question into the second Chamber.

The White Paper is a confused document that exposes the hidden intent behind the reform. All eyes are on the composition of the upper House, but few are considering its powers.

Mr. Phil Hope (Corby): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Evans: No, I have given way sufficiently, and I shall make some progress now. The White Paper states:

"For its functions to be properly performed, the House of Lords needs a degree of legitimacy which it does not now enjoy."

It continues:

"The Government believes that the right of hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House of Lords is a significant factor in the lack of political effectiveness and balance of the House."

Page 11 states:

"The Government wants to see the House of Lords as a modern, fit and effective second chamber of Parliament for the 21st century."

That seems to mean, "Let us get the composition right and the Lords will be more legitimate and better able to use its powers." However, page 40 of the White Paper lets the cat out of the bag when it reveals the Executive's fear that the second Chamber may be effective in bringing the Executive to account. Paragraph 24 states:

"But as well as being constrained by the Parliament Acts, the House of Lords also observes self-denying ordinances in the use of its powers over legislation. The most important of these is, as has been noted, the Salisbury convention. But usually the Lords, conscious of their absence of a specific mandate, their political imbalance and the existence of inheritance as one of the qualifications for membership, have restrained themselves in other ways, going further than the actual legislative constraints on their powers."

Paragraph 25 talks about institutionalising the understandings under which the present House of Lords operates. Paragraph 26 boldly states:

"A better approach might be to reduce the theoretically available powers",

such as

"the length of time the Lords should be able to delay legislation approved by the House of Commons".

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Evans: No.

That has nothing to do with making a more effective House of Lords but everything to do with making a more dominant Executive. Let us consider this Chamber's powers to keep the Executive in check, and the powers of the Whips to encourage obedience—which are obviously working well in the case of the hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart). Then there is the power of the party machine in our constituencies and here, and also the tools available to the Executive, which include patronage and the spin doctors.

That may seem fine to a Government with a mighty majority, but such majorities do not last for ever, as Conservative Members found out to our cost. Part of the modernisation of Parliament must be strengthening the ability of Back Benchers to bring the Executive to account. Instead, the Executive are growing mightier and the Bill will increase that. We have a chance, with these reforms, for a fight back.

As for the transitional, halfway house arrangements, we must remember that the Parliament Act 1911 was only a temporary measure too, and that we had to wait 88 years to consider the matter again. All hon. Members are duty bound to remember where we have got to. I should be grateful if the Parliamentary Secretary will provide some answers, when he winds up the debate, to the questions that I am about to pose.

As regards guarantees, what security of tenure will there be for people appointed to the transitional House? Will they remain there if and when stage 2 comes into operation? If there are no guarantees, what incentives will be used to encourage people of sufficient calibre to offer themselves as transitional Lords?

The White Paper talks about maintaining a significant independent Cross-Bench element. At present, there are 317 Cross-Bench peers—119 lifers and 198 by succession. What will be the total number of Cross Benchers after the reform? If Cross-Bench and other peers cross the Floor of the transitional House, will a system be put in place under which parties can renominate them to that body?

Very few people in this debate have mentioned the costs involved. At present, the cost of maintaining the House of Lords, including building maintenance, is £42 million. The Government have stated that they want the reformed House of Lords to contain a large number of working peers, some of whom will need offices. What support will working peers be given to meet office costs and secretarial allowances?

The royal commission has been asked to spread the net wider when it comes to peers sitting in the House of Lords: indeed, the Minister of State himself talked about "the people's peers". If the Government do not intend that only wealthy people will be attracted to the upper House, what plans do they have for a pay structure for the new peers? I am sure that all hon. Members will accept that people without some wealth would not be able to live in London under the current per diem arrangements.

Who appoints the appointments commission? I know that the guidelines are set out in the White Paper, but there will be political nominees to that body, and who will choose them? We all remember the Jenkins commission farce, when Lord Alexander was announced as the Conservative nominee, even though no one had bothered to consult the party about who it wanted as its representative. Will the three political parties nominate their own appointees? How many nominees will there be? Who will appoint the independent members?

I intervened on the Minister earlier to try to find out whether we would be able to nominate our own political candidate for the royal commission. I think that I was given the answer no. The Government have decided who will be the Conservative nominee—Lord Wakeham—and they think we should be grateful. That is hardly inclusive or proper consultation with a political party. It hardly gives us confidence about the consultation.

How long will the transitional House last? Without giving an answer to that question, the Government are asking for a free ticket without timetable, direction or final destination. A former Minister has said:

"I have concerns about the reform. If all the Government is going to do is to abolish the Hereditary Peers to sit and vote and then kick the second stage into touch it will be a great missed opportunity."

That former Minister was Lord Richard, in the *New Statesman* on 31 July 1998. He continued:

"Whatever you do to the House of Commons is going to make the 2nd chamber more troublesome for the Commons. There is no getting away from that and a lot of MPs on both sides are worried.

I have no idea what the PM's views are. I've not talked to him about it. I don't think his mind has been engaged in this in any concentrated way."

The Government know all the possibilities for stage 2, but they have no clear idea of where to go. We fear the same as Lord Richard and the right hon. Member for Chesterfield and others of independent spirit on the Labour Benches—that the second stage simply will not happen.

I have no doubt that the royal commission will sit, just as the Jenkins commission sat. The royal commission will present a report, just as Jenkins did. If that report does not come up to expectations, however, what will happen to that report? Jenkins is now sitting on a shelf somewhere in Downing street. What will happen if the royal commission's report does not come up to standard? What guarantee do we have that, even after the Joint Committee has seen it, the commission's report will not end up gathering dust on a shelf, just as the Jenkins report on proportional representation has done?

We have been given no guarantee. Stage 1 is happening without stage 2, and hon. Members know that that is the reality. It was Bagehot who said:

"With a perfect lower house it is certain that an upper house would scarcely be of any value. If we had an ideal House of Commons, it is certain that we should not need a higher chamber."

Never have we needed an effective second Chamber more than we need it now.

I have seen wrecking amendments in the past, but the Bill is a wrecking Bill, like all the other wrecking constitutional Bills since May 1997. The Government's approach is incoherent and clearly incomplete. They are not finishing unsettled business from 1911, but creating unsettled business for well into the future. The House has the chance to do something that its Members normally leave to the upper House—to ask the Government to think again. Tonight, let us do just that.

5.23 pm

Sir Edward Heath (Old Bexley and Sidcup): As I always do, I listened with great interest to the speech of the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) yesterday. In particular, I listened to that part in which he said that many of us wanted to keep life peers in the House of Lords because Prime Ministers had such joy in creating them. With a wave of his hand, the right hon. Gentleman said that I was one of those Prime Ministers who had created that sin. Let me tell the right hon. Gentleman that I found absolutely no joy in creating life peers. Every time I created one, nine people turned up saying that it should have been them.

Mr. Benn: For every peer created, there are nine hovering around Prime Ministers, saying, "What a brilliant speech you made." The penumbra of patronage is even more dangerous than the patronage itself.

Sir Edward Heath: With great respect to the right hon. Gentleman, I must say that, when people have been turned down, they do not come saying nice things—exactly the reverse. The right hon. Gentleman said that I was one of those who had created a large number of peers. Therefore, I was inspired to turn up the figures—which are quite interesting.

As we have heard many times, the process started with Harold Macmillan in 1958. I was his Chief Whip at the time, and I remember that one of his main reasons for creating life peers was to bring to the upper House people with experience in business, administration or overseas affairs who would not normally be there. He believed that such people could make an extremely valuable contribution to general debates. His choices were admirable, but they did not fit the Bill. If one follows their careers in the House of Lords, one will find that they seldom contributed anything of unique interest that they had gained from outside experience.

It then became purely and simply a political affair. Life peers were created for a variety of political reasons—often because it was felt that individuals would be less trouble up there. As I have been blamed for running away with this process, I shall give the right hon. Gentleman the figures. I found that Harold Wilson created 226 peers, Lady Thatcher created 216 and my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) created 171. The present Prime Minister, with remarkable speed and determination, has already created 105. Looking at my own figures, I found that my total was 48.

Mr. Mackinlay: The people's Prime Minister.

Sir Edward Heath: My annual rate was only 12. I discourage the right hon. Member for Chesterfield from saying such things in future, because I was certainly not to blame.

I have thought a great deal about the problems that we are discussing today. Of course, this debate is about only one thing: the abolition of the peerage. It is about nothing else. The innumerable questions raised and dozens of comments made in the debate bear no relation to present events. The Bill says simply that we will wipe out the historical peerage in the upper House. That does not make for much of a debate: either you do or you do not. What else is there?

The Government have offered a compromise in the form of a proposal from the Cross Benches that 91 peers should remain in the upper House. We must look at that proposition from two sides. There are those who say that we should keep those 91 peers. Is it a very polite plot, in the hope that time will run on and the 91 will remain? It may be. On the other hand, it may be a rather impolite blackmail on the part of the Government, who are saying, "Very well, we will let 91 stay there, provided you let this Bill go straight through without any trouble." That is my reading of current events. I would not worry about retaining 91 peers because I do not believe that it will mean very much to them. They may be disappointed in the end, and there will be more bad feeling.

The question is: do we abolish the hereditary principle for membership of the upper House? The Leader of the House was quite clear when asked about future developments: she had no answers. The reason is that the Government have not worked anything out. I do not mean to be offensive, but I am absolutely astonished that the Labour party spent 18 years in opposition and did not work out the details of what it wanted to do about the upper House. There is a moral there for my own party: although the Conservatives might not be 18 years in opposition, they must use the time that they are there properly, so as to be ready for the future.

[Sir Edward Heath]

It is true that, in opposition, the Conservatives have to do a great deal of work on their own policies, but it is also true that the reason why the Leader of the House could not say any more than she did is that she does not know any more. However, she did say that the reason why reform broke down in 1968 was that the Government tried to do too much at one time. I have to correct her on that, for that was not the reason at all. The measure commanded a large majority in the Lords—5:1—and the support of all parties; it then came to this House. Devaluation had just occurred and morale was pretty low, but the reason why the measure fell was that it was opposed by Michael Foot, who said, "Away with an upper House—we don't want an upper House at all." He got a lot of support. On the Conservative side, the measure was opposed by Enoch Powell, who said, "Let's go back to the 14th century with the upper House." He got some support. Faced by the two of them, the Government lost their nerve and Harold Wilson said, "Let's pack up." That is what happened—it was not an attempt to do too much at one time.

The debate has proved how impossible it is to have a proper debate unless there are positive propositions on what to do next. The right hon. Member for Chesterfield ended his speech with a warning to the Leader of the House and to the Government, saying, "Yes, but wait for the next stage." We all know what that means, as far as the right hon. Gentleman is concerned: on many different problems, he reaches the last stage and the Government get pretty peeved about it. We now know that, unless propositions are advanced that receive full support from a large number of Labour Members, the Government are in for a difficult time with the next stage.

To give the royal commission only until Christmas sounds fine, but it faces an impossible task. Lord Wakeham is a great friend of mine and was an immensely able Chief Whip. He knows all about the difficulties of administration, but I can assure the House that having a mixed-party commission as well as outsiders, and being told to solve the problem in less than 12 months, is entirely different from solving a party problem as Chief Whip. I wish him well, for he faces an extremely difficult task and we must await the outcome.

Before I sit down, I shall say a few words about my own beliefs. First, I believe that the time has come for the end of the hereditary principle in politics—that is my absolute conviction. We are about to enter the first century of the next millennium and it is time that that came to an end, although that is not in any way to undervalue what has been done in the past by many—not always the same few—families. Theirs was a tremendous task and we owe them a great deal for having carried it out, but it is now over and we must move on to a purely democratic arrangement.

The measure does not affect the royal family for, as we know, the Queen does not sit as an hereditary Member of the House of Lords. In Europe, there are many proofs of that: I have found at least six European Union member countries that have a sound monarchy, but no hereditary system. I therefore want to see the abolition of the hereditary system.

We must then answer the question of what will be substituted for that system. Should we have appointments? That is largely what has been discussed today. I am extraordinarily dubious about switching to any of the systems that have been detailed. The Prime Minister is pleased to have said that he does not want to make all the appointments, but will just look after his party and, similarly, party leaders can look after the other two parties. An odd committee, appointed by the Prime Minister, will look after the rest of the appointments.

That is an opportunity for those leaders to gain far more power than they have at the moment, which would not be in the common interest. It would be extremely dangerous. Their increased powers would apply not only to the upper House, as it would then be, but to a range of their activities in the country, on the economy, politics and administration. Having once occupied that position myself, I know the extent to which it could be abused.

My second point is that the upper House must be elected. That will cause astonishment—I think that I heard a great gasp of breath behind me. If we have an elected system, it must fit in with our present system. That can be done. The powers that are given to the upper House—if we still call it that—need not interfere with the powers of the Commons. That is a question of working out the system and how it will operate.

The fact that we have such a flexible election system for this House makes it very difficult to decide on the election system for another House. In the States, on the same date, representatives are elected for two years and senators for six years. It is not possible to do that here. It is very difficult to decide how that should be done without having a fixed timetable for one or other of the Chambers. We may come round to the idea of having a fixed timetable for both, but that would be an enormous change to our system.

As I have said, this is the end of the hereditary system. It should be the end of appointments, because what will be required in future makes it impossible to have anything other than a mass of stooges, which is not what the system is about.

We are witnessing rapid change—faster than before—of the whole system of our government. I am not sure that it is yet realised that this House is being considerably changed. I am always struck by the fact that those who have the power of organisation want the occupation of MP to be a daytime one. There have been changes to Wednesdays and Thursdays, and we often do not sit on Fridays. We are being given a week off later in the month. That is turning the job of a Member of Parliament into a daytime occupation. The impact is that professional and business men will no longer be able to enter the House. As a result, they will not be available to be members of a Government. That is a drastic change which will affect the rest of society as well as the membership and behaviour of this House.

I do not believe that such a process can be changed now that it is on the move. The Prime Minister comes here on Wednesdays for half an hour of questions and gets tired at the end, but does not appear otherwise. This debate, tremendous as it is, has not been attended by the Prime Minister or the Leader of the Opposition. My hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), who opened for the Opposition yesterday, has not appeared today and the Leader of the House has now disappeared. That shows the lack of attention now paid to Parliament. I see that developing with the greatest possible regret

because it is immensely damaging to our political system and the welfare of our present citizens and those who are due to follow.

I want an elected upper House and an elected lower House because they will have the power to deal with those who simply want to cast off the whole parliamentary system and run it in a centralised fashion. It is becoming more and more centralised because that is how—I shall not go into the niceties of the issue—those in power get their way, reaching all the ends that they want to reach.

This is a momentous debate; you may not have realised, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We must consider matters in this new way because we in this House can try to influence developments. That is the lesson that I draw from this one-way debate. Although it may be solely about abolishing the hereditary system, it is one of the indicators of the future of our parliamentary government.

5.41 pm

Mr. Peter Mandelson (Hartlepool): I think that all of us would agree that the speech of the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath) was utterly commendable for its clarity and firmness of view. Thank goodness that, at long last, someone on the Conservative Benches has expressed a firm opinion on how the reforms should be carried forward. However, our Government Front-Bench team should not embrace his blandishments and his suggestion that we should decide on the outcome of the reforms and the review before we embark on anything. I agreed with my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House when she said yesterday that, only too often, the House has been prevented from conducting any reform because it has become bogged down in an insistence that everything be right and clarified before any change is made.

The course of action on which the Government have embarked, including the decision to depart in one respect from the party manifesto to set up a royal commission before establishing a Joint Committee of both Houses, is therefore absolutely right. *[Interruption.]* I do not in any way want to risk stirring up and provoking my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay), but I am afraid that I must tell him that I was the lonely voice in the original Cabinet Committee discussion who urged that we set up a royal commission. I did so because I thought that the party's original commitment to create a Joint Committee of both Houses immediately was rather incestuous and introspective. I thought that it was right—the Government decided that it was right—to create a mechanism by which we could tap the views of the wider public and all those who want to contribute to those matters before both Houses came together to decide how to proceed.

Incidentally, I hope that I have not just breached part of the Official Secrets Act 1911 in disclosing such a point. I do not want to retard any progress that I may or may not be making. I shall just chalk it up on my freedom of information slate for a later day.

I also thought that setting up a royal commission was right because there was every risk that a Joint Committee of both Houses would become a political playground for the Opposition, who would not be able to resist playing politics with it, in which it would be difficult to reach any half-decent outcome in any reasonable time.

We have seen from the debate so far that the Opposition are incapable of placing the interests of Parliament above their own narrow party and partisan interest. In the process, they have tied themselves in the most awful convoluted knots, as was evident from the speeches of those on the Opposition Front Bench, both yesterday and today. What we heard today from the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) was a contortion too far, even by the standards of this Opposition.

No doubt, the Tory party will try to free itself from its illogical predicament by means of a late burst of democratic enthusiasm, when its own commission under the chairmanship of Lord Mackay reports. It would not surprise me in the least if the Tories were to follow rather tardily and, in this respect alone, unfortunately, the leadership shown by their former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup.

However, no late democratic conversion undergone by the Opposition will carry any conviction whatever with the public. Most people observing their antics will simply conclude that they are showing an interest in a democratic second Chamber only because no one is showing any interest in their returning to power in this Chamber. People will conclude, rightly, that that is a pretty squalid and cynical exercise on the Opposition's part, that their interest in a democratic second House is only skin deep and that their democratic credentials remain wafer thin.

What is clear from so many of the speeches that we have heard from the Opposition is their deep longing to retain their 3:1 in-built hereditary majority, which they have held on to through so many generations. If they were given half a chance, they would continue to do so.

The Government should pursue their simple, step-by-step, considered and consensus-building approach to reform of the House of Lords. If the so-called Weatherill amendment is offered again in the other place, we should probably embrace it. It would be a proper reward for good behaviour on the part of a House that might otherwise be tempted to filibuster the Bill endlessly, thus doing enormous damage to the rest of the Government's programme. If we can get the Bill and the rest of the programme on which we were elected through the upper House with minimum delay and damage to ourselves, we should seize the opportunity.

I certainly do not think that we should embrace such an amendment if it were offered in this place during our Committee stage. It should be a matter of consensus building, which we should judge in the light of the behaviour of the other place.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Has not the right hon. Gentleman just demonstrated his utter cynicism? He is prepared to vote against the amendment, as it were, one week, and to vote for it the next, at the behest of his party bosses. Is not such an exercise in cynicism beneath contempt?

Mr. Mandelson: It is an exercise in eminently good sense from a party member who supports a Government who want to get their business through both Houses, because that is what we were elected to do. Our approach and behaviour should take their cue from the attitude and behaviour of others in the upper House. That is entirely reasonable.

The Government's approach and the discussions that we conduct should start with the recognition that the House of Lords is far from bad, but that it can be improved. Its revising wisdom is, for the most part, a

[Mr. Mandelson]

benefit rather than a hindrance to the parliamentary process. It must be recognised, however, that there are two aspects of the House of Lords that the public find objectionable. The first is the existence of hereditary peers—the principle of being born to rule, something that the public will never accept, and nor should they—and the second is that the public find unacceptable the excessive power of patronage by the Prime Minister, however worthy and suited are his nominees to membership of the other place. Both those objections about the House of Lords are rightly addressed in the Bill.

What people like about the House of Lords is the fact that it is, in some respects, somewhat less partisan, and somewhat less tribal, than this place. The public like the idea of Cross Benchers—people who do not owe their membership of the House of Lords to the patronage of a party or to having been shepherded by Whips—and the idea that the House of Lords is a collection of soldiers, dons, business men, doctors and trade unionists. Although they like the composition of the House of Lords, they would certainly prefer the average age of its Members to be reduced, and for it to have more women and more representatives of ethnic minorities.

Mr. Mackinlay: If we were to pause after implementing the new arrangements, how we would get the loose cannon, the bloody-minded, the eccentric and the awkward? Those people simply would not become Members of the House of Lords, except by patronage. One of the benefits of electoral systems is that they throw up the bloody minded, the awkward and the irritable. That is important, because a Chamber of Parliament must have that cocktail of characters to provide scrutiny and accountability, without fear or favour and without showing partial affection. If we pause with the setting up of an independent commission for the Cross Benchers and the involvement of party leaders, we will not get that.

Mr. Mandelson: I shall overlook my hon. Friend's obvious invitation, and come to that point in a moment. I entirely agree that the bloody-minded should have their place in the House of Lords. He could draw up criteria that might be introduced on the workings of the appointments commission and I am sure that such an amendment, in due course, would be taken very seriously by Ministers.

The public do not want the removal of a clear party mandate, a clear manifesto and a clear means—the basis—by which a Government can carry their programme in this place. Those, of course, are the basis of the House of Commons: people know exactly what manifesto they are voting for, they offer a clear mandate and they vote to constitute a majority for the governing party in this place. People like such clarity and the straightforwardness about this place, which depend entirely on the dominant role given to the House of Commons by the Parliament Acts and by the Salisbury convention. Any reform of the House of Lords needs to take that firmly into account; if we alter the basis on which this place operates, rather than enhance democracy, we will risk severe damage to it.

Mr. Robert Jackson (Wantage): I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will take a moment to note that his arguments about the straightforwardness of the system for election to this place and the manifestos are the main arguments for retaining our present system of voting for the House of Commons.

Mr. Mandelson: I recognise that entirely, but that argument is set against the other argument in favour of electoral reform, which is that we want a more representative and more fairly elected House of Commons. If the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I will not be drawn on that issue on this occasion.

I do not want the House of Commons to be demoted. I do not want the conditions created in which we would create two rather powerful Houses of Parliament which would compete, risking gridlock and constitutional stalemate between them. That would be the inevitable consequence of building up the House of Lords and its powers through any reforms that we might be minded to introduce. That is not a matter for the Bill; in the first instance, it is a matter for the royal commission and its excellent chairman, Lord Wakeham.

I cannot resist teasing the Government slightly about Lord Wakeham. I learned of his appointment in the way that we are always informed about the background to the Government's thinking: through the proliferation of spin doctors and such people who, I am afraid, infest this place. When I heard that Lord Wakeham—a Tory peer—was being appointed to prove that no one was trying to fix anything, a smile came to my face. After all, there is no better fixer than Lord Wakeham. He is lucky, as we are, to have sitting alongside him that paragon of selfless humanity, independence and integrity—my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman).

I shall offer the House two concluding thoughts on reform and thinking about the future composition of the House of Lords, but will not be drawn on them in any detail because this is not the time. First, when—in my view, at least—some glue is needed in the United Kingdom to set against the possible fissiparous effects of devolution, a second Chamber, if constituted and composed in the right way, could contribute a bit of that much-needed glue, to keep the United Kingdom together. I am glad that the Government have given some inkling of that thinking in the White Paper, which is absolutely right.

I contribute my second idea as a well-known, if not notorious, pro-European who is none the less worried about the remoteness and lack of legitimacy of the European Union's institutions. This is not the time to develop that argument; I have done so on other occasions in other places. If we were to use the second Chamber to create a link between this national Parliament and the European Parliament, we would help to overcome the slight gulf that has opened up between this Parliament and the institutions of the European Union.

In both those respects, we could use this opportunity of reform of the House of Lords to make other, wider improvements to our constitutional settlement. I have no doubt that those ideas, along with many other worthy proposals, will be considered by the royal commission in due course.

5.59 pm

Mr. John Major (Huntingdon): Let me begin by welcoming the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) back to the Back Benches. It is an

honourable estate. As a Back Bencher, the right hon. Gentleman has an important part to play in trying to check the control of an Executive with an over-mighty parliamentary majority, and I look forward to seeing him perform that role.

Certainly, during the past few minutes, the right hon. Gentleman has demonstrated that he has the capacity to surprise. Not since Satan denounced sin have I heard such a recantation as the right hon. Gentleman's remarks about the possible implications for the "glue" of the United Kingdom of the devolution policies that he previously supported. But, speaking with some experience, I can tell him that he will find that returning to the Back Benches is not too bad; indeed, it has a large number of compensations.

I once advocated a classless society, so I am not here to defend the hereditary principle for legislative purposes. It is, for those purposes, a dead principle, and I am unconcerned about that aspect of what the Government propose in the short term. I am here to defend the effective and efficient working of Parliament, in Commons and Lords, for I do not wish to see that die in the same fashion as the hereditary principle, which is now doomed to extinction.

Over recent months, we have had a great deal of talk about reform of the House of Lords. Let us be clear: up to a point, this is reform. It is the first half, the destructive half, of reform. It is tearing down what exists; it is condemning the hereditaries to the tumbrel—but it builds for the future, nothing. It is, at the moment, a blank cheque for the future of the House of Lords. The hereditaries are disappearing into a vacuum, and, as we wish them godspeed, we have no idea what will replace them in the medium term. Not even my right hon. and noble Friend Lord Wakeham has any idea, and he is to chair the royal commission—a royal commission with an impossible mandate: to replace 700 years of constitutional practice in a few months of part-time consideration.

I do not know what the commission will propose. Maybe—given the virtues of the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman), as adumbrated by the right hon. Member for Hartlepool—if and when the Government ever get around to appointing all of it, the commission will prove to be very wise; maybe. What I do know is that, given the time scale, it will have no time for consultation, no time for consideration, no time for reflection, and no time to weigh the implications of what it may decide. If there had been some weighing of the implications of the Scotland Bill, we might not have had the Scotland Bill and the right hon. Member for Hartlepool might not now be worried about the glue of the United Kingdom. What is clear is that the commission has no time. The timetable imposed by the Government makes it less of a royal commission, as I have always understood it, and more of a high-powered fig leaf, as the Prime Minister understands it.

I hope that, when they have been appointed, the commissioners will examine their task and then say to the Government, "This is an important task, but if we are to perform it properly we must ask for more time. We are, after all, a royal commission and not a focus group, and we want to produce a report, which will be considered by Parliament in both Houses, of which we can be proud, not a report that has been too rushed."

I do not say that to make a short partisan point; I say it because the way in which Parliament works, in Lords and Commons, matters to us. Whatever changes may be made in the House of Lords will have an effect on the House of Commons. That is why, earlier, I sought the Minister's assurance that, if the Joint Committee of the Commons and the Lords disliked the royal commission's recommendations, the House of Commons would have an opportunity to decide on the Committee's views on a free vote, rather than a Whip imposed by a Government with a very large majority.

Thus far, this reform has been sold to the country on a questionable prospectus. If we are to believe Cabinet Ministers, a phalanx of self-interested peers, Conservative to the bone—both men and women—appears whenever necessary to frustrate the people's Government. I speak as one who occasionally had a bit of his Government frustrated by those same peers. The concept that they are there, waiting to rush out of the hills and frustrate just this Government, simply does not stand up to examination. When they attacked my Government, it was to the cheers of Labour Members; when they attack their Government, the peers are very impertinent. How dare they raise the possibility that the Government might be wrong! What a dreadful proposition! Off with their heads! The Leader of the House is pleased to see them go at the first possible moment: she will be there at the guillotine, knitting to hand, as head after head disappears in the near future.

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Major: I will not, if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me.

Hereditary peers are, of course, an easy target to attack. As I have said, I am not here to defend the hereditary principle in legislative terms—

Mr. Hope: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Major: I may give way a little later.

The Government, however, never miss any target if it can deliver an easy headline. It does not matter whether the target is the unpopular principle of hereditary peers, or the dotty ramblings of a football coach; if there is a mob mentality to disagree, this Government will put themselves at the head of that mentality in order to garner a headline or two.

Now, who was the first to intervene?

Mr. Hope: I have listened carefully to the right hon. Gentleman, and I understand that he and Opposition Front Benchers do not support the inclusion of hereditary peers in a reformed second Chamber. Can the right hon. Gentleman therefore explain why he and his Front Benchers seem to support the inclusion of hereditary peers in determining the composition of that second Chamber?

Mr. Major: If the hon. Gentleman will let me proceed, he will learn many other things, as well as the answer to that point.

Let me now make a substantive point. Although hereditary peers are to go, even Labour Members, in their quieter moments away from the Chamber, will admit that many of the hereditary peers—not all; they will not

[Mr. Major]

concede that—have had great virtues. They will admit that one of those virtues—I testify to it, for it was used against me often enough—is their independence, because of their hereditary nature, from the party Whips, when they choose to exercise it.

How is such independence to be replicated? We have heard nothing of that from any Minister. How are the new peers to have the independence of Whips that the present Lords enjoy? The Government do not know the answer to that. How are the new peers to have the vocation of the hereditary peers? It was said earlier—and I can testify to this, too—that many of the life peers appointed were keen to go to the House of Lords, and were going to be there morning, noon and night; my goodness, they would turn up on Sundays. Where are they—not just those whom I appointed, but those appointed by many others, including the present Prime Minister? No sooner are their bottoms on the red leather Benches than they zip off somewhere else, and turn up only occasionally.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): There are some in the Gallery.

Mr. Major: There are, of course, exceptions, who not only attend the House of Lords but are diligent enough to return to listen to what is said in the Commons.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: Did not Lord Archer miss the 1994 Conservative party conference, when storms were raging over the Anglia Television deal, because he was too busy as a working Conservative peer? He is a real busybody, that Lord Archer, is he not?

Mr. Major: I can think of a substantial number of peers whose work rate in the House of Lords does not match that of my noble Friend Lord Archer.

We are told that we should not worry about the mass axing of the peers because the Government have a mandate. Yes, they have; but as an argument of principle that is pretty pathetic. It is generally the last refuge of a Government who, although they have no credible case, can at least point to something that was in their manifesto. But I must tell them that they have no mandate to act without thinking about what they will do to our constitution and to the working of our Parliament. They have no mandate to tear down what works without telling the House of Commons what they will replace it with. They can tear it down, but, before they do so, they have an obligation to explain what comes in its place.

Liberty needs protection from democracy. The Government are tearing apart, piece by piece, act by act, the most sophisticated constitution of them all, with little real understanding of the implications of what they are doing. That is why I think that it is a mean, inadequate little Bill. It is not because of the substantive point; it is because of what is not in the Bill but should be. The Bill utterly misses the chance of a proper reform of the Lords and, with it, reform that will have an implication for us in the House.

What will the new Lords, as no doubt it will come to be known, be about? Will it be a deliberative Chamber? Will it be a revising Chamber? Will it be a check on over-mighty government? Or will it be a rubber stamp for party hacks, party funders and party apologists in the upper House? If it is, I might be inclined to join my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath) and to contemplate a wholly elected House—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) should not over-excite himself.

The ideal is a Commons that is democratic and decisive, and a Lords that is independent and reflective. Will it be so? A proper reform would make clear what the future of the Lords is to be. Will it retain the right to delay and to change legislation? If rights are lost, the ancient checks, balances and safeguards of our constitution will genuinely be at risk.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Major: I will in a moment.

We should define and, in some ways, increase the power of the Lords, because it can carry out work that will help the work of this Chamber and make it easier. It is and must remain the subordinate House, but it could do work that would make it easier for the House of Commons to carry out its functions properly. That would be a real reform.

Why not, as a matter of routine—it cannot always be done, but the Leader of the House will know that it could often be done—as often as possible send draft legislation to the Lords for examination and for comment before it comes to the House of Commons? Why not let the Lords take public evidence on many contentious and technical issues, so that we may produce better drafted legislation?

Why not give the Lords a statutory obligation to take evidence on European legislation and on treaty commitments, so that the House of Commons may be better informed when it comes to consider those matters? Why not have a standing commission to consider our evolving constitution? At the moment, it evolves as a result of piecemeal actions by the House of Commons, by judges and in other ways. Why not let a standing commission consider how the constitution operates? Those reforms to the Lords would be worth while. They could be part of the Bill, but they are not.

Let us be a bit more dramatic. Why not look at ministerial roles as well? Why not let Ministers vote in one House, but speak in both Houses? One practical advantage of that is that it could significantly reduce the number of Ministers, and I know from personal experience that that would be a thoroughly good thing. It would also save immeasurably on travel expenses.

Why should not the Prime Minister—who, without consulting me, the then Leader of the Opposition, or, so far as I know, the Liberal Democrats or any other party, decided to present himself here once, rather than twice, a week—contemplate answering questions in the House of Lords occasionally as well? I say that not to be mischievous, but to suggest what we might do to make the work of the two Houses more cohesive, and to put the upper House in a better position to support the work of the primary House—the Commons. Let us look at those ideas.

What we have before us is a little cameo of a Bill. It is vindictive in its intent and probably unthinking in its effect. That is hardly worthy of much of the hype that has surrounded it.

Mr. Maclennan: Is not the argument that the right hon. Gentleman uses the sort of argument that was used against

the removal of the rotten boroughs in 1832? Is he not condemning a good reform by admitting that it does not solve the entire problem? Surely we can vote to condemn the rotten boroughs and accept that the franchise should be widened further later.

Mr. Major: The right hon. Gentleman is entirely wrong. The whole thrust of what I have been saying is that I do not object to the departure for legislative purposes of the hereditary peerage, but that, as part of the Bill, we should be enhancing the way in which both Houses of Parliament examine legislation and have control over the Executive. Fewer Ministers means more Back Benchers: that is another helpful thought on control over the Executive. Sadly, it is becoming all too evident that the whole Bill has been poorly considered. It has been poorly prepared. It is partisan. We do not know what will follow it and neither, worryingly, do the Government.

Mr. Savidge: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Major: I will not, if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me.

Like other constitutional changes, the Bill diminishes Parliament in the Lords and, potentially, in the Commons. In many of the things that they are doing, the Government run the risk of bypassing the House of Commons as well.

The Cabinet and Prime Minister, like all their predecessors, have some virtues and many faults. Among their failings, the one that concerns me most is not a single item of policy—they have won an election and they are entitled to put their policies into operation; they have the majority to do it—but, and I profoundly hope that I am wrong, their disregard, even contempt, for the views of anyone other than themselves. Even the House of Commons—Parliament itself—is for them too often apparently a rubber stamp and an irritating anachronism. Their reforms in the House of Commons are already in danger of turning it into a derelict, powerless and pointless place that is empty for half the week.

That is one of the practical effects of moving Prime Minister's questions from Tuesday and Thursday to one single Question Time on Wednesday, and of the other reforms that the Leader of the House and the Government have brought forward. That may be convenient for this Government at this time, but it is not good for the House of Commons in the short or long term.

Dr. Ladyman: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Major: No.

If the Government are attacked, their habit is to attack the critics, not answer the criticism. They strangle alternative views even in their own party, as a number of their Back Benchers will testify. That is why reforming our constitution piecemeal without the whole scenario being subjected to proper democratic examination in this House and the next is so dangerous.

On the Bill, the Government have listened to nothing thus far but their prejudices. Like the Scotland Act 1998, it may yet prove to be a shambles, with a constitutional price to be paid in future.

The abolition of the peers on their own is no great point, but the Commons should remember that introducing such a measure without proper consideration and examination of all that it entails is but part of a pattern. It should remember that it is the master of the Government, not its servant, and should realise that diminishing the power of any part of Parliament in the way that the Bill does runs the risk of diminishing the power of every part of Parliament.

The question before us today is the abolition of the peers—very well; abolish them. However, the real issue behind the Government's overall constitutional change is the authority of Parliament itself over the Executive. On that issue, this House—both Opposition Members and Government Members—should think very carefully, to decide how far it will permit the Government to go before it asserts its own rights.

6.20 pm

Mr. Nigel Griffiths (Edinburgh, South): I welcome the House of Lords Bill, which, at long last, will give this place the opportunity of transforming significantly the upper House. All previous attempts at reform have been the subject of guerrilla tactics by opponents of change, and by unlikely alliances, such as the ones mentioned by the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath) that included Michael Foot and the late Enoch Powell.

Achieving reform in two stages, in a relatively simple five-clause Bill, was a tactical masterstroke. It is no wonder the Opposition are calling for a more comprehensive Bill, as that would allow them and the unelected peers on whom they rely to frustrate the legislation and to bog down reform in ancient procedures, so that they may misuse the past to impede the future.

It is a myth that the House of Lords is a reforming force; the opposite is true. At every milestone in democracy—the male franchise, votes for women, abolition of slavery, and even the Ballot Act 1872—the House of Lords has been a force of reaction.

We know the impact of that reaction in my own city of Edinburgh. When the Lords opposed the Great Reform Act 1832, Edinburgh had a population of more than 100,000 men, women and children. Guess how many citizens were entitled to vote? It was not half the 100,000 population, not a quarter of it and not even one tenth; in 1832, only 33 citizens could vote in the whole of Edinburgh. The House of Lords whole heartedly endorsed that old, undemocratic and corrupt arrangement. The fact was that 100,000 citizens in Edinburgh were disfranchised, and that it was not the peers, but the people themselves who fought for greater democracy. That is why we take no lessons from the peers.

Today, little has changed with regard to the majority of those in the Corridors of the other place. This year, 81 more peers gained entitlement to sit in Parliament, by right of birth, than hon. Members were elected to Parliament, in a general election involving 31 million voters. Today—70 years after all women gained the vote—there are still 62 peers who may sit in the other place but who do not even live in Britain. Those peers can legislate in the other place and affect the lives of millions of people.

We are supporting the Bill on behalf of the descendants of Edinburgh citizens who never had the vote, not on behalf of the few descendants of a handful of people who were chosen centuries ago by the reigning monarch.

[Mr. Nigel Griffiths]

In 1997, the people of Edinburgh voted for the party that pledged itself to modernise our country and our democracy.

Reform of the House of Lords is long overdue. It is therefore fitting that our Labour Government are now, in this Bill, making such positive and practical proposals. By what right can hereditary peers veto reforms necessary to modernise our health service, to invest in our schools, colleges and universities and to give the jobless a new deal? We cannot allow an unrepresentative second Chamber to block progress.

As the Bill deals with a matter of principle, I shall make no adverse comments on the quality of those who sit in another place. I question the legitimacy of peers' rights on the ground not of paternity, but of democracy. Some of those in the other place are descended from families that have rendered this country great service, including outstanding scientists, doctors, teachers, engineers and explorers, and great military figures and great humanitarians. However, they are all in the other place because of patronage—as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) said earlier in the debate, in his expansive, amusing and highly thought-provoking style.

The House should not, however, confuse some of the reminiscences and forceful views expressed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield with the facts. He was right to point out that, since monarchs effectively ceded their powers to Parliament, Prime Ministers have increasingly exercised patronage in appointments to the House of Lords. However, it is simply not true to say that that practice continues unabated. For the first time, we have a Prime Minister who is determined to reduce his powers of patronage in appointments to the other place. He wants to give his powers to an independent appointments commission, so that it may make non-political appointments to the second Chamber.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield lamented that he was unable to cede similar powers when, as President of the Council of Ministers, he used the royal prerogative without any consultation with Parliament. It was an amusing debating point. Nevertheless, at the time my right hon. Friend did not feel sufficiently strongly to make an issue of the nature of those powers. His comments, 22 years later, make for interesting listening.

The Bill is not the last word in reform. Some people see greater merit in a unicameral legislature that is strengthened by committees—which would operate constructively, like our Select Committees, rather than as the farce into which our Standing Committees too often descend. Such committees could scrutinise legislation far better than the House of Lords currently does.

Some people advocate an elected second Chamber. The current problems in the American Congress and Senate demonstrate some of the pitfalls of such a system.

The Bill will, at a stroke, remove the biggest single obstacle to change: hereditary peers. The Bill seeks only to accomplish that objective and will take us one more step along the historic path on which we embarked in May 1997. Modernisation of the House of Commons has started. We have legislated for elected bodies in Scotland and Wales and for elections in London. Now, we are dealing with modernisation of the House of Lords.

We are achieving a goal that has eluded Parliament for most of this century. If nothing more follows from the Bill—if it stands alone—we can be proud of giving our legislature a modern and fresh start for the new century.

6.27 pm

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): We support the Bill—which is hardly surprising, as we have been trying to get rid of the hereditary peers for 100 years. The Bill itself closely follows the Cook-Maclennan agreement, and is clearly only the first stage in a relatively speedy process of fundamental reform.

At times, particularly yesterday, the debate on the Bill seemed like a rerun of the 1911 debate. Today, we have heard some new ideas, which have been quite interesting, especially when considering the source—former Prime Ministers—of some of them. Yesterday's debate was like the 1911 debate without the passion. We should remember that, in 1911, Asquith was denied a hearing by the Conservatives for about three quarters of an hour.

Now, the argument is over. No one outside the diminished Conservative ranks, and not many within them, really believes that the hereditary principle is an acceptable way of choosing a legislature. However, I should say that, yesterday, the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) said that

"the hereditary principle in itself is not something that we challenge."—[*Official Report*, 1 February 1999; Vol. 324, c. 620.]

The statement is there on the record, although I think that it rather slipped out.

The usual Conservative approach to the issue is not to defend the hereditary system but to temporise, to delay and to offer seductive arguments, to the effect that any partial change is unacceptable, because it must all be done at one go. Of course they hope that, with luck, that will never happen, because they have a majority in the current Lords to frustrate change. There would therefore never be a satisfactory scheme, so nothing would ever change.

The Conservatives had 18 years in power, during which they could have reformed the system in their own way. They never lifted a finger to do so. There was a hint that they might do so, only once or twice, when Mrs. Thatcher suffered the occasional severe rebuff in the other place. Perhaps she woke up one morning and said, "Let's just abolish them"; but nothing ever happened. *[Interruption.]* That is what she used to do. When bits of the constitution annoyed her, such as the Greater London council, she was not against sweeping them away entirely. However, something stopped her doing so when it came to dealing with the Lords. [Hon. Members: "Perhaps she needed somewhere to go."] Indeed. Perhaps she had a place lined up for herself.

When another Government try to do something about it, every argument and delay is deployed. We have been discussing the issue for some time now. One historian records that, in the 1910 constitutional conference, the Conservatives

"dangled all kinds of fantastic bargains before the indifferent noses of Asquith and Lloyd George"—

including joint sittings on constitutional matters, but

"the one thing they were not ready to sacrifice was the essentially Conservative nature of the Upper House."

—and so it remains.

Then it occurred to me that there is a crucial difference between 1999 and 1911. In the 1911 debates, the Conservative peers and their relations wanted to die in the ditch for hereditary peerages. Ironically, Lord Cranborne's kinsman, Lord Hugh Cecil, led the jeers that drowned out Asquith. Now, however, the peers are offering compromise and the Conservative Leader and a few of his hon. Friends are enthusiastic about fighting in the last ditch.

It is said that in 1911, when the Conservative Lord Lansdowne heard Lord Halsbury speak against the Bill, he

"knew, as one sentence followed another, that he could no longer vouch for the sanity of his followers".

Lord Cranborne must have felt rather similarly about the Leader of the Opposition during the fateful meeting at which he was told that he should never have offered the well-known compromise for the interim House.

Several hereditary peers live in my constituency, which has quite a long feudal tradition. They really are a decent bunch. They are all landowners, and one is a very large landowner. In various ways, they make a valuable contribution to the life of the community. I have not noticed any of them pressing to prolong a system which adds a seat in the legislature to their inheritance. I do not think that any of them, particularly the new generation, see it as their role in life. If they did, they would probably prefer to seek democratic legitimacy by standing for election. The battle to keep the House of Lords as our second Chamber is now being fought not by hereditary peers, but by those within in the Conservative party who look back with nostalgia to a society long gone. It is the battle of the young fogeys.

Let us not forget that the Bill creates only an interim House, whose days are necessarily numbered, and that will create future problems for the Government. When the commission and the Committee of both Houses have done their work and we are ready to put in place a new and more democratic second Chamber, 500 life peers will lose their entitlement to be legislators until their dying day and their right to the facilities and opportunities afforded by membership. Life peers have a higher average age, and are the most extensive users of the splendid facilities of the House. I fear that the Government may have a harder time convincing some of their well-established life peers, particularly those who have gone there after long service, of the merits of phase 2. Yet phase 2 is integral to the reform and we welcome the Government's commitment to it.

Before I turn briefly to the phase 2 second Chamber, I have a couple of secondary questions that arise from the Bill. Are peerages as an honour to become obsolete, or will titles be granted in future? If so, will it be on a life or hereditary basis? Mrs. Thatcher had a rather strange habit of awarding hereditary peerages to people who had no male heirs. The last remnants of the creation of hereditary peerage were in her time and on that basis. Will peerages continue to be awarded as honours; and on what basis? I do not think that anyone has made a decision on that.

Mr. Linton: Although the Bill says clearly that hereditary peers should lose only their right to sit and vote in the House of Lords and that it should not affect their status in any other way, once hereditary peers have lost their powers and privileges would it not be open to the Government or anyone else to refer to them by their names rather than their titles, in the same way as any other citizen?

Mr. Beith: Some of them prefer it. If, for the sake of argument, I am allowed to breach the rules of the House, the right hon. Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram) prefers to be called Mr. Michael Ancram, although that is not, in terms of the peerage, his real name. No doubt others will follow suit, but that is not what we are discussing.

We are trying to create an effective second Chamber and the Bill raises the question whether hereditary peers should be created in future. I certainly hope not, as honours should be awarded for what people do in their lifetime and not be conferred on successive generations. That also goes for the quaint practice of calling the children of life peers "honourable"—a perversity that dates from the 1960s.

Consideration is being given to ways in which other denominations and major religious groups could complement the Church of England bishops in the interim House. I believe that the Church of Scotland and the English free Churches welcome the idea, but it requires a different approach because, emphatically and as a matter of belief, there is no equivalent to bishops in their systems. Leadership is exercised by ministers and lay people in a variety of offices. Some are annual offices rather than long-term positions. Episcopacy and a priestly caste are alien to their traditions. The Government should bear that in mind in considering the make-up of the interim House.

The Government will also have to give some thought to the issue of Scottish representation in the interim House, bearing in mind that it was specifically provided for in the Treaty of Union and in subsequent legislation, including the Peerage Act 1963, which greatly widened Scottish representation in the second Chamber.

I would assert two principles in respect of the phase 2 second Chamber. First, we wish to see a predominantly elected House. We see room for a procedure to allow some nominated Members so as to ensure the continued membership of people from walks of life that preclude involvement in party politics; but it needs to be a democratic Chamber.

Secondly, its role should complement the role of the House of Commons: it should neither rival it nor replicate it. Its delaying capacity should effectively be limited and not be subjected to bypassing by the extended ping-pong that was illustrated by the European Parliamentary Elections Bill. The second Chamber should be able to force the House to think again, and not merely as a formality; but the wholly elected House, once it has fair elections, must prevail.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) suggested yesterday, the second Chamber should do things that the House cannot readily do or does not do very well. It could review certain public appointments, and fill more of the gap in the scrutiny of delegated legislation. It should have a role in representing the specific concerns of the nations and regions of the United Kingdom and their Parliaments and assemblies.

On the other hand, the other place probably does not need to do some of the things that it does now. It is not necessarily logical to repeat ministerial statements in the

[Mr. Beith]

second Chamber. However, I was quite attracted by the suggestion of the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), that from time to time the Prime Minister might answer questions in the second Chamber and that Ministers from this House should be able to take their legislation through a reformed second Chamber, replacing the requirement for Ministers to be appointed in another place.

The issues will be considered in the commission and in the Joint Committee. If we were not committed to a speedy process, I would be anxious about the Bill progressing in its present form because it leaves the second Chamber in an unsatisfactory temporary state. However, even in those circumstances I would still, with a heavy heart, want my right hon. and hon. Friends to vote for the Bill because, at long last, it ends a totally indefensible feature of our constitution which has defied numerous previous attempts at reform. So let us get on with it.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): I call Mr. Marshall Hall.

6.38 pm

Mr. Robert Marshall-Andrews (Medway): I am delighted that you should have made that error, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as it has never been made before.

I begin by saying what a privilege and joy it is—it fills me with humility to speak in the same debate as the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath). Until he spoke, I had intended to begin by saying that I had never participated in a debate that had revealed so starkly the intellectual and political poverty of the Opposition. By that, of course I mean the present Opposition.

This is a fine Bill. It is an historic and seminal Bill, which deserves—and will almost certainly receive—wholehearted support. However, I have one fundamental reservation about it. Its only substantive clause—clause 1—extends to 17 words. As my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House said, it is beautifully simple. However, beauty and simplicity can be improved on. My reservation about the Bill is that it is far too long. The single important clause reads:

"No-one shall be a member of the House of Lords by virtue of a hereditary peerage."

I should prefer a shorter Bill, which would read:

"No one shall be a member of the House of Lords."

If that is felt to be too succinct, I would be prepared to widen it so that it read:

"No one shall be a member of the House of Lords or anything remotely like it."

Hon. Members will understand that I wish to come out and reveal myself to be an unashamed, intractable, practising unicameralist. I suspect that when the second Great Reform Bill comes to be debated—the important Bill—the Government will discover that many others will come out and reveal themselves to be intractable and practising unicameralists.

In a modern elective democracy based on constituency Members of Parliament of integrity and reasonable ability, there is no purpose in having a second Chamber, be it elected, partly elected, appointed, partly appointed, anointed, semi-anointed or even driven in haphazard groups from the street to form the people's second House.

As we enter the transitional phase that we are debating, I bleed for my Government and the difficulties that lie in store. The likely constitution of the new, interim, transitional House of Lords is a glorious mess, relying partly on patronage, partly on old patronage, partly on a new appointments commission of doubtful legitimacy and partly on a rump of self-selected peers—presumably those with nowhere better to go. Reform thereafter will be even more difficult, relying on a hitherto unappointed royal commission which will have to struggle with the myriad ways in which a second Chamber may be cobbled together and the associated powers that it may be allowed.

Anyone who has made any study, however ephemeral, of royal commissions and their habits will see immediately that the terms of reference are mischievous and far too wide. There are only two. The first is to consider and make recommendations on the role and functions of a second Chamber. The second is to make recommendations on the method, or combination of methods, of composition required to constitute a second Chamber.

We, the elected representatives of the people, are setting up a small royal commission composed of the great and the good. I have no faith in the great and the good in this country. This country's economic decline over the past 50 years can be laid entirely at the door of the great and the good. I say that with due deference to several hon. Members. The one thing that has not impeded this country's progress in the past half a century has been this Chamber and the Palace of Westminster. Yet we in this Chamber are deferring to a small and unelected commission of the great and the good. In their terms of reference, we are asking them to tell us what we want and saying that we do not know how the second Chamber will be elected or what it is going to do—we want their recommendations.

I have little confidence in terms of reference that are so wide, because the ambit of the report will be so great that it will be too easy for any committee to refuse its recommendations. To reform this House and the Palace of Westminster, we do not require the expense of the members of a royal commission; we require a gang of bricklayers. They should be told as a matter of urgency to wall up the entrance on the other side of the Central Lobby. After they have applied themselves to the necessary amount of Pugin wallpaper, the job can be completed in a week. The same firm could then be employed to turn what used to be the second Chamber into a reclusive home for the elderly and infirm, no doubt looked after by supernurses.

When that is done, we shall at long last be left to our own devices in this House. In particular, we shall be freed from the most pernicious aspect of the second Chamber—the power of patronage. We have no concern about dealing with the hereditary principle. It is an intellectual deficit on the part of the Conservatives that some of them continue to argue, at least by implication, for its retention. Patronage is the great evil that we must fight. The difficulty with the transitional provisions and any provisions that may follow is that at least some members of the second Chamber will be appointed by patronage, which will lie in the hands of the Prime Minister.

Here we have a double nepotism. Not only will some people be elevated to the upper House by the patronage of the Prime Minister; thereafter they may be elevated into government by the same patronage. That is an intolerable system which is long overdue for reform. I ask my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House to address the issue, because the transitional provisions will do nothing to stop that double nepotism.

The absent Leader of the Opposition is struggling to climb a mountain to get back to electoral respectability. Some of the few blows that he succeeds in landing in the House are his points about nepotism and patronage. The continual allegations about Tony's cronies are some of the few that cause Labour Members some consternation and periods of silence, as Conservative Members will have observed.

The Leader of the Opposition has a point that he may probe. However, the great problem is whether he will promise that he would not employ such patronage. As Prime Minister, if there were an upper House with nominated members, would he turn his face against such patronage and refuse to appoint to the Government those who were not elected? If he said that, I suggest that he would earn public respect—the lack of which, hitherto, has been part of his problem.

I am one of the few unicameralists to have absolutely and genuinely come out—probably the only one—and spoken in the debate. I listened with great respect to the speech of the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells); it was rather less than totally full-blooded in its commitment to unicameralism. If I am wrong, I shall retract my statement immediately. One or two of us may come out in the debate, and I suspect that many more will come out in due course.

It distresses me when I hear colleagues on both sides of the House deliver apologias for the continued existence of a second Chamber by saying that we need it as a check on an over-mighty Executive. We are the check on the Executive in this Chamber, and we need no help or sustenance from anybody else.

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): I am sorry that the hon. and learned Gentleman thought that my adherence to unicameralism was not as full-hearted as his clearly is. The difference between us is simply that I do not believe—as I said yesterday—that any proposal that comes from the Committee, which he so accurately described, meaning that power is transferred from this Chamber to whatever ersatz assembly we establish, either temporarily or permanently, will be agreed by this elected House of Commons: and that is quite right. Unicameralism is therefore the only solution.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. The chances of this House passing, or the Committee recommending, a unicameralist solution to the problem is small indeed. That is one of the reasons I have not tabled an amendment to the Bill—because I am not given to exercises in futility.

On the other hand, that does not stop me saying that there is manifestly only one answer to the problems with which we are grappling. What distresses me when I hear Members producing apologias for the existence of the second Chamber is that they are, in fact, providing an alibi for our own inadequacies. That concerns me more than anything else. Let us have done with it, once and for all.

When we no longer have that alibi, hon. Members who, at this stage, are content—because the second Chamber exists—to adhere to the Whip in circumstances where they do not agree and where they may wish to be a check on the Executive may, in due course, change. In addition, we will need to review the Select Committee and other Committee procedures to provide the wherewithal for this House, and this House alone, to provide the check on the Executive—which is, in reality, the substance of the debate.

6.54 pm

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills): It is always interesting to hear a political party that has discovered Thomas Paine two centuries after his advent. From the House of Lords to here, the repetition of the notion, that there is nothing so absurd as the principle that the Poet Laureate should be hereditary, manifestly demonstrates the absurdity of the hereditary principle.

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: Why?

Mr. Shepherd: Because—I say to the hon. Gentleman, who spoke dismally for most of his speech—it does not follow that one has a talent that is inherited.

Many of us on both sides of the House have never thought that the hereditary principle should inform our constitutional arrangements in the latter part of the 20th century, and in a long-established democratic nation. The Government's attack on the upper House has been focused on the question of legitimacy. That is why I will profoundly disagree later in my speech with the hon. and learned Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews) about a unicameral system of government.

The Government, rightly, have challenged legitimacy. Why should it be that, because I am the inheritor of my father's name, I should be a legislator in a democracy? However, that question can be asked of an appointee. We did away with the aldermanic principle in local government. Why should one be a legislator by appointment? That is profoundly anti-democratic in itself.

What underlies the concern of my right hon. and hon. Friends is the true incoherence with which the Government—with neither history nor an understanding of where we have come from—tackle important constitutional change. The right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) thinks that, after he has done his constitutional mis-works, the United Kingdom may require glue which the House of Lords may provide in an—unstated—reformed state. Many of us do not like taking a step in the dark, for the very reasons that have been adduced by the Government. One stage may not lead to another, and an unknown second step may be perilous to us.

The right hon. Member for Hartlepool, in a twist of fortune, may appreciate that he also made a step in the dark that led him astray. However, he still talks as if he were running Government Front Benchers and trying to hold them on-message. The act of hubris in his speech was bemusing to someone who has served as a Back-Bench Member for 20 years.

The American revolution was not founded in an abyss. Thomas Paine's great language—which fired that part of a discovered continent, and helped inform the French revolution—was a declaration of principles. When the

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revolution was successful, those principles were filled in by the building of a constitution. The American constitution—which was spoken of disparagingly by some—has stood the test of two centuries. It has protected and enhanced the freedoms and liberties of the American people, and it has protected them against revolution.

The British constitution has done likewise. For three centuries, the British constitution has provided a focus, and it came about because of the impetus from here—this House of Commons. When the Government talk about the primacy of the House of Commons, I have an historic and instinctive sympathy for the argument. However, that primacy has long since gone in the 20 years that I have been here.

Is this an independent Chamber? No, of course not. It is the creature of the person who leads the party with a majority. This is not a partisan point. The frustration of Labour Members who served in previous Parliaments was palpable in terms of what they thought were unpalatable and over-reaching acts. There is no defence for the people of this country against a parliamentary majority, and that is the danger that has informed our constitution.

Mr. Sheldon: Government Back Benchers were always the safeguard. If the Government do not have an overwhelming majority—such as there is now—sufficient Government Back Benchers can bring about change.

Mr. Shepherd: The right hon. Gentleman will know that that is my sentiment and that I have tried to honour that principle, as have others in this House. However, in the age of patronage and promotion, one sees press reports that state that the only value of a Member of Parliament is if he or she is a rising star. It is assumed that the only purpose of being a Member of Parliament is to influence or to become a member of the Administration; hence some of the frustration of those in opposition.

I hold the setting aside of the disciplines of party to be the ideal; those disciplines have killed with patronage this Chamber's effectiveness in safeguarding the liberties of our citizens. The Law Lords recognise that fact and judicial review has become an important method of trying to protect the citizen. We have invoked the European Court of Human Rights as part of our domestic law, because of our own failures; time and time again, the argument could be won, but the vote was lost.

We no longer protect freedoms and liberties. It used to be a central argument of constitutional reform or the building of constitutions that one has checks and balances, back and forth. Montesquieu analysed the English constitution. We should use the phrase "English constitution" more, because the glory of this island flowered from an English constitutional settlement over many centuries. The island was incorporated, but the House no longer represents its elements. I have seen Conservative Governments, with no majority in Scotland, voting against the intent of Scottish Members and not even listening to their own Back Benchers on Scottish law reform. When that happened, we were no longer representative.

The Prime Minister controls the House, which is effectively his poodle. The outside world recognises that. That is why we have fallen in the world's esteem. That has happened not because Ministers take Concorde, but because we no longer act as a proper brake or check on the ambitions of the Executive. Whenever one says anything about Government policy, it becomes manifest that the whole mechanism is geared to defend it even when it is unsustainable.

As an instance, I take the emergency terrorism provisions for which the House was summoned in the summer. The Irish Supreme Court has said that the legislation is inoperable and the Royal Ulster Constabulary has said that it cannot be used. More consultations are being held and it is very inconvenient. The legislation became imperial management of a presidential nature.

Mr. Dalyell: Pre-Mrs. Thatcher, it was not always so. For example, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) is right: Harold Wilson could not accede to the pressing request of the President of the United States, Lyndon Johnson, to send what he called "a battalion of bagpipers" to Vietnam, because Michael Foot, Jack Mendelson and many others prevented him from doing so. When there was a normal majority—a thin one—in 1978-79, devolution was a rather different story.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: I am not too keen on the thin majority point.

I agree with a great deal of what the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) says, including about the terrorism provisions. Does he agree that, if one wants to inject some backbone into Government, and possibly Opposition, Back Benchers, so that they can indulge in the luxury of independent or dangerous thought, the existence of a second Chamber is precisely the way of inhibiting that, because that so-called countervailing force or check is in reality no check at all and merely gives the Government yet another way of controlling their Back Benchers?

Mr. Shepherd: I started by saying that the Government attacked the House of Lords by questioning its legitimacy. Clearly, if part of the legislature has no legitimacy, it ceases to be a proper check; it has no authority. Every time the second Chamber does something of which the Government disapprove, the charge is made that it is not legitimate.

We have an opportunity to reform the second Chamber and make it a representative body. It is unthinkable to me that, in a democracy, those who legislate do not stand accountable to the electorate—the people of this island—in determining whether a law is valid. I listened with the greatest respect to my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath). It is funny how, as one grows older, the spirit grows younger. I understand from some of his colleagues when he was Prime Minister that the world was not entirely as he may have suggested, but he rightly described how we were beginning to see the prospect of this country having checks and balances, and a constitution in balance. Labour's reforms have shown us how uniquely vulnerable we are to huge upheaval, whereby we end up with the master of spin, now out of the Government, saying that maybe we need glue.

I am deeply concerned, as many hon. Members have been. I believe that the second Chamber should be elected and that its powers should be enhanced to provide the

necessary checks and balances. The former Attorney-General, no less, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell), said that election to the House of Lords should be staged, and I agree. I believe that the Government should have to fight for their business. I have been concerned by the growing assertion by Prime Ministers and acceptance by Back Benchers that Governments have a right to their business. It is for Parliament to adjudicate on whether the business proposed by the Government has sufficient merit, but the process is no longer seen in those terms.

Considering the great opportunity presented by the Bill, even in the absence of a thought from the Government, the very conditions laid down in the White Paper are grotesquely inappropriate. The primacy of the House once lay in the fact that we were more representative and that we could exercise power as it ebbed away from the landowners. Our people had to pay the money that made Government work. There was a real purpose to us.

Now, as we increasingly become baying party hacks, on-message, with bleepers, trying to juggle the minds and imaginations of a free people, we are merely prattling along; we are an empty Chamber, echoing to who knows what. This nation's vitality was in discourse. There is much talk about what can happen if we sit in semicircles or horseshoes and connect—I use language familiar to the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey)—and find a new, purposeful way forward. All we want is a settlement and a coherent constitutional reform.

The Government specifically charge that we are not interested in constitutional reform; but I am, and I know that many of my colleagues are. I am slightly ashamed that, almost two years into a Labour Government, with the clear objective of a half-baked, half-stage reform—

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Shepherd: Excuse me.

Many of us have a genuine concern that reform could be frozen at the point that we have reached; then we will have a House of total patronage. I took encouragement from my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup when he commented on the qualities of some of the appointees. There is nothing distinguished about some of them, although, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) suddenly recalled, there were merits in some of his appointees, and they attended debates.

The Labour Government know full well that half their glitterati, who have never contributed anything to public debate in terms of the details of legislation, do not turn up. What is their purpose? It is a blatant exercise in what most excites a sinking nation at the end of the 20th century: patronage. People want to be a lord, a knight, a something. In the historical context that amounted to something, but today it is but a bauble. In America, people build hospitals or museums to get the fame and recognition that we confer by patronage.

I did not mean to take so long, but I wanted to say that I agree with my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench to the extent that the proposals should be thought through. However, I also tell them that what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. The royal commission has to report by the end of this year and it is already 2 February. The Bill will go through and my party has no identified, coherent, alternative strategy for the building of a constitution. We have to have one, and quickly. It is not as if we have not had time to reflect on the matter. This is, alas, no longer the age of pamphlets, but the arguments have been laid out. How do we ensure checks and balances? How do we rein in the Executive?

I agree that individuals can make a difference, but only for the lifetime of their stay in this House. We must broaden the inclusion of elected representatives. It is banal and absurd to suggest that people from the Clapham omnibus should be sent to the House of Lords—a title that must be replaced by, perhaps, the senate or the second Chamber—at random, as if in some revival of Athenian democracy. We might as well make it a lottery prize and say to people, "Well, you didn't win £8 million, but you are now a Member of the House of Lords." That sums up the crassness of this Government's approach to deep matters which involve the protection of our liberty and freedoms. We must be a body that expresses and, therefore, represents. Most of us are not.

7.12 pm

Angela Smith (Basildon): I have spent many happy hours yesterday and today listening to the debate on the Bill, and I have been surprised that so little of it has focused on what the Bill is about. That arises from the confusion among the Opposition about whether they are for or against the Bill. In 1997, the Conservative party handbook for the general election made its position clear by stating that it was important to defend the hereditary principle on its own merits, but only one Conservative Member has had the courage to do so. I wonder what else the handbook contained that Conservatives would no longer defend.

The Conservatives have missed the point of the debate. Whatever follows—and we all have a great interest in that—it is right that we get rid of the voting rights of hereditary peers, because they are wrong in principle. Only those who undervalue the role of legislators, and the scrutiny of the work of the Government and the House could argue that accident of birth is qualification enough for a seat in the second Chamber. For some, the issue is that there is an inbuilt Tory majority through the hereditary peers. As wrong as that is, the arguments for reform are valid whether the inbuilt majority is Tory or Labour.

It is a great shame that, with a golden opportunity before us to reform the constitution and modernise this place, we have to drag the Opposition kicking and screaming into the 21st century. However, perhaps we should not be surprised. On more than one occasion in the past, we have had to drag the Conservative party forward, kicking and screaming. I hesitate to go back as far as the repeal of the corn laws in case a Conservative Member contradicts me and says that they should not have been repealed, but every stage met with opposition from the Conservatives then. Even when Attlee marginally reduced the powers of the House of Lords in 1947, he was heckled by Churchill, then a Conservative, who described the Government's action—overplaying his hand somewhat—as an "act of socialist aggression".

Perhaps even sadder was the House's response to the early attempts to gain votes for women. At the beginning of this century, Members of Parliament used

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parliamentary tactics and every single trick in the book to prevent women from getting the vote. Few people would now oppose the women's suffrage Bill of 1904, but it failed. It was second on the Order Paper to a non-controversial private Member's Bill, which proposed that carts travelling on public roads at night should carry a light behind as well as a light in front. Few Members disagreed with the Bill, but it was debated for hour upon hour to frustrate change and modernisation of the constitution.

Mr. Tyrie: Is the hon. Lady aware that the extension of the franchise to women was accomplished in two stages, with the first stage introduced by a coalition Government including the Conservatives and the second—the reduction of the voting age from 30 to 21—by a Conservative Government?

Angela Smith: I am aware of that, but the reform could have been achieved much earlier had Conservative Governments supported it. Contemporary accounts mention silly stories and foolish jokes being told during the debate, while other Members joined in the laughter. Such behaviour, then as now, does nothing to raise this House in the public's esteem. Members probably felt safer ridiculing such measures in those days because there were no cameras in the House to record their antics. That is another progressive measure that was opposed by Conservatives.

A former Member of the House, Charles Bradlaugh, was unable to take his seat until he had the right to affirm the oath. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) mentioned yesterday that he was here because the law was changed to remove his hereditary title. There was opposition to the reduction of the voting age from 21 to 18. I raise those examples to show that the modernisation of Parliament has always been slow, tortuous and difficult.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) corrected the hon. Lady on her point about suffrage, and I wish to remind her that virtually every reform of the 19th century was opposed by the Liberal party and pioneered by the Conservative party. I think specifically of prison reform, slum clearance, Disraeli's reform Acts and a range of social and economic legislation. The hon. Lady should take a more thorough look at history before she makes such claims.

Angela Smith: I make no claims for the Liberals, but I was talking about constitutional reform. I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's correction, as he puts it, because history shows that Conservatives took a long time to accept reform. Many Opposition Members have already accepted that the hereditary principle is wrong, having supported it at the time of the last election. Reforms such as working class men getting the vote, women getting the vote and secret ballots all had to be fought for, but nobody today would argue that we should go back and that those reforms were not essential. It is incredible today to think that anybody argued against those measures, and people in the future will be incredulous that Members of the House of Commons were prepared to support the right of hereditary peers to take part in our legislature.

Those of us who passionately believe in the reform of the second Chamber have waited a long time for the Bill. I must correct some of the comments made by Opposition Members. We are not seeking an easy life. There is a role for a second Chamber in a modern democracy, but to be effective it must have legitimacy. There is no legitimacy in using an accident of birth to claim privilege. The current qualifications for membership of the upper House bring into question the authority and integrity of our entire parliamentary system. Last week, Lord Strathclyde said that their lordships have sought answers from Governments on

"deep and detailed questions about Bills and policy".

He is right to say that that is a good role for the second Chamber, but he claimed that their lordships did so

"on behalf of the people of this country."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 20 January 1999; Vol. 596, c. 586.]

He missed the point. He has no authority to ask for anything on behalf of the people of this country: he asks for himself.

Mr. Grieve: Does the hon. Lady agree that when the reform set out in the Bill has been achieved, and the hereditary peers have been removed, the life peers who remain will be in no better position to claim that legitimacy?

Angela Smith: That point has been dealt with many times. The life peers in the transitional House will be there on their own merit, not on the merit of people from centuries ago.

The Labour party has always had a somewhat uneasy relationship with the House of Lords. Many distinguished parliamentarians from the House of Commons have refused to take a seat in the Lords because of its undemocratic composition. In his autobiography, Fenner Brockway—whom many Labour Members recall with great affection—recalled his dilemma at being offered a seat in the House of Lords. He wondered whether it would compromise his principles: indeed, he seemed far more delighted that the local council named a block of flats after him than he was with his new title. He used to delight people with the story of how a friend wrote to him and addressed the envelope to The Lord Brockway, without adding the number of the house. The letter was returned with the words "No public house of that name in this street" written across the envelope.

Yet if Fenner Brockway had not taken his seat in the House of Lords, we would have been deprived of the political contribution of an honest, radical, courageous and decent man. I make that point to emphasise that this Bill is essential, not because of any individual Members of the House of Lords, but because the debate is about the legitimacy of the upper Chamber.

Mr. Evans: The hon. Lady has given us a potted history of how the people have had to fight to increase democracy in this country. I accept that that is what happened, but will she say whether there would be any circumstances in which she would vote for a decrease in the power of the second Chamber to check the Executive? Would she support increasing the powers of a legitimate second Chamber to check the Executive?

Angela Smith: Unlike the hon. Gentleman, I shall wait until the royal commission has completed its report, as I want to give those questions as much detailed consideration and thought as we are giving the Bill.

I repeat: an accident of birth cannot give a person the right to participate in the law-making process in this country. When my father retires, I will not be taken on to make radiators at Ford, and nor should I be. I have no special privileges because of the random circumstances of my birth, and nor should anyone else.

The House has a golden opportunity tonight to move forward into the future, or to look backwards. I hope that support will come from Conservative Members who, although they claim that they support getting rid of the hereditary principle, seem very reluctant to vote in favour of the Bill.

7.22 pm

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): Every so often in each Parliament a Bill comes along that tells us more about its promoters than about its provisions. This is just such a Bill.

The Bill is sinister and deeply flawed. What the Government propose has to be stated again and again so that people may fully appreciate the constitutional monstrosity involved. The Government are expelling 60 per cent. of one House of Parliament without indicating how that portion is to be replaced: in other words, 40 per cent. of Members of Parliament as a whole—it is worth reminding ourselves that peers are Members of Parliament—are to be expelled.

We have been given neither a clear idea of how those Members of Parliament will be replaced nor any binding commitment to come up with a specific plan for their replacement. At the very least, the expulsions should be stayed until the royal commission report—or the Joint Committee deliberations or the colour of the Government's proposals—clarify what will stand in their place.

The composition of the House of Lords cannot be considered until there is agreement about what that House's functions and powers should be. That is as self-evident today as it was to those of us who wrestled with the issue in the committee appointed by the then Mrs. Thatcher, and chaired by the late Lord Home, more than 21 years ago.

By introducing stage 1 without giving any indication about stage 2, the Government defy their own instruction to the royal commission. As Lady Jay made clear, the terms of reference ask the royal commission

"to consider the role and functions of the second chamber as a preliminary to considering its composition."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 20 January 1999; Vol. 596, c. 585.]

Those are the instructions to the royal commission, but the Bill defies them. We are asked to embrace stage 1, not as a subsequent or complementary task, but as a preliminary. Tonight, we set in train the process of expelling 60 per cent. of the Members of one House of Parliament, without a single firm proposal on how those Members will be replaced, or any agreement on the functions that a new and newly reformed House will perform. We are asked to begin that process on the basis of a deeply flawed Bill.

The Bill has three major flaws, and one minor flaw.

Mr. Linton: The hon. Gentleman said that what he calls the expulsion of the hereditary peers should be stayed at the very least. Does he or does he not support the retention of hereditary peers in the long term?

Mr. Fallon: No. Once we have agreement on the functions and powers of a second Chamber, there can be no case for retention of the hereditary principle or of the existing hereditary Members. If the hon. Gentleman reads the 1978 report of the Conservative review committee, he will see that position clearly set out.

The first major flaw in the Bill is that it contains no commitment to introduce stage 2. There is no such commitment in the preamble, let alone in the text of the clauses. In the Parliament Act 1911, the preamble at least stated that, eventually, there would be an elected or modernised second Chamber. It is true that stage 2 of that process was delayed, but the commitment to that stage was always present in the 1911 Act. It remained as a constant reminder, like a knot in a handkerchief, and I urge Ministers to accept an amendment to make it clear that they are committed to introducing stage 2 in this Parliament.

What the Minister of State said this afternoon worried me further. He said that the Government would simply be looking at proposals emerging from the royal commission, and at proposals that the Joint Committee had scrutinised. I hope that when the Parliamentary Secretary winds up the debate, he will reaffirm the Government's intention to proceed with stage 2 in this Parliament. That would give us some compensation at least for the expulsion that the Bill sets in train tonight. Otherwise, we will be left—as we were after 1911—with stage 1 on its own. There will be a hostage House up the Corridor, kept on permanent tenterhooks at the bidding of the Government, with no commitment to its replacement by stage 2.

The second flaw in the Government's proposals for the temporary House is that there is no limit on that House's membership. It is true that there is no limit on the membership of the present House of Lords, but that has long been acknowledged as one of its weaknesses. The problem is less important because only 40 per cent. of that House is nominated. In the new, interim House established by the Bill, almost all Members will be nominated. It is therefore vital, as a constitutional safeguard, to have an upper limit on the patronage that the Prime Minister, through the appointments commission, will so freely dispense.

We have not been told very much about the appointments commission. Who appoints it? Cronies, as Conservative Members have learnt, can appoint cronies—that is the essence of cronyism. The Bill should contain a constitutional safeguard against the Government flooding the interim, temporary House with cronies when they need to overcome a difficulty in getting legislation through.

Dr. Ladyman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Fallon: No, not at the moment.

That limit could take a number of forms. It could be a numerical ceiling on the size of the upper House. Equally, it could be a limit on the number of new creations that can be made in any one year.

The limit on the size of the temporary House is needed because of the third and most serious flaw—the failure to exclude the Bill from the operation of the Parliament Acts. The draftsmen of 1911 did not exclude the 1911 Act, which was assumed to be a piece of temporary legislation. There is no need to repeat that mistake now. The principle should be obvious: the new temporary House should have to consent to the reform of its own composition, just as we are required to consent to stage 2 and future

[Mr. Fallon]

modernisation—otherwise, we shall have no check at all on the next stage of constitutional reform, which could be whipped through the House of Commons, then through the temporary House.

If the Government accept some check under the Parliament Acts for the lifetime of a Parliament, it automatically follows that, having reformed the other chamber, they should accept a similar check on the composition of Parliament. If they are not prepared to accept that in the Bill, they have precious little faith in the composition of the temporary House that we are asked to license.

Mr. Beith: It seems odd to criticise the temporary House because it is open to cronyism and will consist entirely of appointed members while simultaneously insisting that its assent is essential to any reform that would make it better.

Mr. Fallon: The missing link is another flaw—the lack of a ceiling on the number of Members. Once that is put in place, there will at least be one check on the extent to which the temporary House could be flooded with additional creations.

Dr. Ladyman: Does the hon. Gentleman feel no sense of shame when he talks about the Government flooding the House of Lords? The Government of whom he was a member were prepared to bus in 450 hereditary peers to enforce their will on the Maastricht treaty. When the Conservatives were in government, they could temporarily influence the composition of the other place whenever they wanted.

Mr. Fallon: If the hon. Gentleman had studied the history of the upper House during the Conservative years, he might have been interested to note that the Parliament Acts procedure has been used only against a Conservative Government. In all the years since the revision of the Parliament Acts in 1947, the procedure has been triggered only once—against a Conservative Government during the passage of the War Crimes Act 1991. The hon. Gentleman would also have learnt that even Margaret Thatcher in her heyday was often checked and her provisions reversed by the upper House. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) explained, Conservative Governments had to live with that, and even with being checked by Conservative peers. The Labour Government are not prepared to tolerate that for a moment.

Mr. Robert N. Wareing (Liverpool, West Derby): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Fallon: I want to make some progress because some of my hon. Friends wish to speak.

The Minister may be able to clear up a final minor flaw in the drafting of the Bill. This is one of the few occasions on which we are entitled to refer to the Prince of Wales. Clause 5 classifies the Prince of Wales as an hereditary peer, and he will therefore be barred from the upper House. Will the Minister clarify whether the Prince of Wales will therefore be entitled to stand for this House?

The Prince of Wales might run from Highgrove, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown), or from St. James's palace, which is situated in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), so they, at least, ought to know whether the Prince would be able to stand for election to the House of Commons. He made occasional, but important, contributions to debates in the other place. If he is entitled to stand for the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly, I cannot see why his talents should be denied to the House of Commons.

Let us consider the principles behind the Bill. The Conservatives have always supported a strong House of Lords. Conservatives fought to protect the longer delaying powers contained in the Parliament Act 1911. We introduced life peers in 1958. Our Front-Bench team supported Dick Crossman's reforms to remove the hereditary peers 30 years ago. Margaret Thatcher and our present leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), have set up our own review committees to consider how to strengthen the House of Lords.

Mr. Hope: It is clear that there is some support on the Conservative Benches for the abolition of the hereditary principle. In that case, why must the hereditary peers play any role in determining the make-up of the second Chamber?

Mr. Fallon: The hereditary peers are being invited by the Prime Minister to play a part in determining the future of the second Chamber and its continuity with the existing chamber. The Prime Minister cooked up that deal, so the hon. Gentleman should address his question to his own Government.

We support a strong House of Lords, but it is becoming ever clearer that Labour wants a weaker House. We have at least heard the honesty of the unicameralist position set out so clearly by the hon. and learned Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews). True socialists have always been single-chamber democrats. They have always trumpeted the doctrine of the mandate. Once elected, they say, a Government can do anything in the name of the popular will. That is how they define democracy—unlimited government.

We, on the contrary, have always accepted that the will of the 51 per cent. cannot be absolute, as that would be the path to elective dictatorship. There must be limits to the force of the mandate. Why else would Governments seek a fresh mandate? John Stuart Mill famously wrote of how

> "A majority in a single assembly . . . easily becomes despotic and overweening".

We intuitively accept that there must be limits in a democracy to the authority of a popular majority. As we reform the House of Lords, two issues are before the House: where those limits derive their authority from; and how we give them institutional expression.

Some countries ascribe authority to old age or experience. In our country, we once ascribed authority to mediaeval offices—that is why the bishops sit in the House of Lords. Part of the answer may lie in tradition, although I would not claim that dukes, marquesses and earls are custodians of any living tradition. Another part of the answer lies in the common law, but that common law has been weakened by statute, and surrendered, neatly, to Europe.

These matters are difficult to elucidate, but the very survival of our second Chamber as a constitutional safeguard can be seen in the exemption from the Parliament Acts of any Bill to extend the life of Parliament. That concept implies the existence of some other source of authority in our society, above the ability simply to choose and to change a Government. We accept that there must be limits to the ability of the 51 per cent. to tyrannise the 49 per cent. Given that the monarch is now a figurehead, and given that the common law is subservient to statute or to continental law, it is only the existence of a strong second Chamber that can protect people against their Government.

Labour Members and the Government want a weaker House of Lords. The White Paper clearly signals that fact. A key question that it poses for the royal commission is whether the functions of the present House of Lords are still necessary. It queries the interrogative function with some weasel words about whether the House of Lords should still have direct access to Ministers.

Even the second Chamber's legislative function—the essence of a Chamber of Parliament—is questioned. The White Paper suggests that the second Chamber should no longer pass amendments that it can stick to but should offer what it coyly calls

"recommendations for improvements to legislation".

We will have a new stage in the passage of Bills called "Lords' suggestions". The House of Lords will not be able to play a proper legislative role and pass its own amendments to Bills. The Government come clean at the end of the White Paper—they can no longer disguise their intentions. On page 40, they say that there is a case for reducing the "theoretically available powers".

The Government admit that there might be a case for reducing the delaying power and scrapping the ability of the Lords to propose amendments in lieu to House of Commons legislation. They even want to scrap the Lords' power to reject secondary legislation. That means that a Bill in this place—we have seen several of them in the past year and a half—that gives Ministers enormous powers regarding secondary legislation and orders that are steamrollered through this place cannot be checked because the House of Lords will not be able to exercise its traditional rights over secondary legislation. That is a Cromwellian law-making position.

There we have it. This Bill is not about Parliament: it is about government. It is about making life easier for Ministers and their officials. It is about saving Ministers the chore of having to expose their policies to public scrutiny and about eliminating the need to justify their Bills and orders and submit them to the public gaze. The Bill is about making government easier, quicker and simpler. That was never more clearly stated, somewhat carelessly and shamelessly, than by Baroness Jay—who, by the way, has never troubled to seek election to any public office. In her statement on 20 January, she said that House of Lords reform is about "modernising government".

There we have it: in a single sentence, we can see the present Government's contempt for the House. The Government equate Parliament with government—for Labour Members, the two are synonymous. That is why, in the past 18 months, this place has become mere lobby fodder. That is why, against the wishes of Madam Speaker, the Prime Minister comes here only once a week. That is why our powers are being given away to new assemblies or foreign councils. That is why constitutional Bills are guillotined. The Government believe that Parliament is simply an extension of government.

That should come as no surprise. Some 21 years ago, the Labour party opposed the second Chamber in its entirety. In 1977, the Barry constituency Labour party tabled a resolution, which read:

"the House of Lords should be deprived of its present powers over primary and delegated legislation and should be renamed the Consultative Council of the Realm."

That moderate resolution was swept away by the Labour party conference, which voted by 6,248,000 to 91,000—a majority of 6,157,000—for the

"total abolition of the House of Lords and the reform of Parliament into an efficient, single-chamber, legislating body without delay."

Labour wants a legislative machine. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) reminded us eloquently, that is not the sole function of the House. We are here not simply to pass laws but to represent people's grievances. We are here not just to mobilise consent but to express opinions. We are here not just to facilitate the Executive but to protect the governed. This Bill, which vandalises the upper House and expels more than 700 members of our Parliament, signals not just a weaker second Chamber but marks yet another step in the deliberate enfeeblement of our own.

7.45 pm

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): Like all Labour Members, I welcome the Bill and its provisions for removing the hereditary peers. I played a role in the 1968-69 legislation, which I shall describe briefly while revealing some of the pitfalls that we must avoid.

The last time the House was involved in debating the future of the House of Lords was 1969. I opposed that legislation, proposed by a Labour Government, because it involved a scheme, planned with the collusion of the two Front Benches, that would have provided an aldermanic bench. Back Benchers on both sides opposed the measure. Hon. Members may not recall that aldermen held an historic position in local government. Once a councillor was elected to the bench, he stayed there for life. He was influential and respected, with no elections to fight—it was an envied position.

The scheme devised by Dick Crossman was of that type. It was designed to lead eventually to paid peers enjoying power without the troublesome task of fighting elections. It was about power with security, and, understandably, it did not enjoy the enthusiastic support of Back Benchers on either side. My role in that process was to realise at the outset that the guillotine could not be applied to the Bill. While others were playing parliamentary games, I saw that it could be defeated. After 14 days and 14 nights, including morning sittings, the Bill was finally dropped.

The case that is always made in support of the second Chamber concerns its role in revising legislation. However, as Professor Griffiths—the great expert on constitutional matters—pointed out long ago, and as page 36 of the White Paper confirms, Lords amendments are more often than not Government amendments. The Lords' role in this process, although useful, may be easily overstated. In fact, the Select Committees could undertake part of that work—and there has been a move in that

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direction. Nowadays, Select Committees are more powerful and membership of them is much sought after, which makes it easy to transfer that part of Parliament's work to them.

In the present debate, many hon. Members have expressed the wish to see the House of Lords become more independent of the Executive. That has been a common theme throughout. Some hon. Members have looked to the Lords to redress the weakness of the House of Commons in facing the Executive. The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) made that point: he said that the weakness of the House of Commons in facing the Executive could be remedied by improving the standing of the House of Lords.

The weakness of this place has increased over the past 20 years. The failure to halt the poll tax, and rail privatisation—which was called by the great Conservative Member of Parliament, the late Robert Adley, a "poll tax on wheels"—was not the fault of the House of Lords: the responsibility lay with us. We were the pusillanimous House of Commons. We do not need more powers; we have enough already. The trouble is that we have not used those powers when it was necessary to do so.

I have thought that the weakness of the House of Commons in the past 20 years—first with Margaret Thatcher and now with a 417-seat majority party, which produces its own problems—has been an aberration. We can deal with many of the changes that are called for so long as we have the resolve to do so. If the resolve is there, the aberration ends.

The measure before us is limited—and I support it fully. In yesterday's debate, most hon. Members agreed that the hereditary peers had to go. The amendment that is yet to come will provide for the 91 hereditaries to remain for the first phase. The royal commission is to produce its conclusions by the end of this year, in nine months' time. I wish it well.

Some years ago, the Royal Institute of Public Administration held a one-day seminar for those who had been members of royal commissions. I had been involved in one on civil service reform and so was invited to attend. All those attending that large seminar felt some disillusionment; some even expressed anger at the fact that their work had been used not to bring about change. In some cases, they felt their work had been ignored; in others, that there had been lengthy delay. In the case of civil service reform, the surprise of others was a surprise to me—I had expected what happened in that respect. It took 17 years and a Conservative Government for the civil service reform that I had wanted to be achieved. There had been 1,400 departmental committees within the civil service, but a complete end to that nonsense was not brought about for 17 years. Let us not misunderstand the likely speed of reform in this country. Although 17 years' delay is a serious matter, the lesson of that seminar is that the majority of reports are not implemented and that none is implemented speedily.

The royal commission on the House of Lords has to consider an endless variety of alternative systems. In the debate so far, we have heard many suggestions: the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) suggested a House of Lords comprising 87 senators; a unicameral solution was proposed by the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews); a House of experts was suggested by my hon. Friend the Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris); and there have been many other suggestions. There are as many solutions as there are Members of Parliament—many and diverse are the schemes that can be proposed.

Those schemes are not the only considerations that the royal commission has to survey: it will have to consider the consequences of devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as our relationship to Europe and other constitutional changes. The commission has to digest all that, but it cannot know how those matters will turn out in practice for some time yet, and what form they eventually assume has to be an integral part of the commission's consultations.

After that hurdle has been cleared, there is to be the Joint Committee of both Houses. How long will that take? Then, there is the passage of a further Bill from this House to be negotiated. We must remember that, if that measure is taken in the next Parliament, there will be new Members of Parliament who do not have our experience and background and who will have to learn what arguments were made in the preceding Parliament. The result of all that is that one does not need to be a pessimist to believe that there might be some delay before the second stage takes place.

My fear is that the first stage will be the only stage. There is a case for that, but it is nothing like the case that we want to be made. However, there is limited appetite for constitutional reform. After the proposals for devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and changes to the European Parliament elections, we see that House of Lords reform can hold only limited interest once we have passed from general observations to detailed examination of legislation. That is where the problem arises. Broad statements of principle can achieve some sort of consensus; it is the detail that will split asunder not only parties, but even individuals who find it hard to find agreement among themselves on central matters, so complex are the possibilities.

We must remember that Lord Cranborne did not act to accept the retention of 91 hereditary peers and so undertake what many considered to be a treacherous act in order to buy two or three years of continuation; he realised that there was a possibility that the arrangement would last in perpetuity—or at least for his lifetime. That is why he did what he did and subverted the Conservative Opposition—his eye was not on the short term, but on the possibility that stage 1 could be the only stage. That is the view of one who has some considerable knowledge and understanding of the position. In the light of all that, we need to consider more carefully than we have done throughout this debate what happens in phase 1. We are currently dealing with phase 1, which might last for a long time, so let us see what we can do to get it right.

In phase 1, 91 hereditary peers are to remain, bolstered by the creation of new peers who would make the House of Lords somewhat, albeit not a great deal, more representative of the electorate than it is at present. There would then be an increase, not only in its legitimacy, but in its perceived legitimacy; therefore, it is unlikely that the interim Lords would be quite as restrained as the unreconstructed House. In other words, the Lords would be likely to throw their weight around a little more, and

certainly no less, than they do at present. The increase in legitimacy could lead to an increased use of the powers currently available to the Lords.

If the Lords in the transitional House really wanted to get their way on a specific issue, they would not necessarily be bound by any convention—Salisbury or otherwise—that was acceptable in a wholly unjustifiable House. The current Lords are constrained because they realise that it is illegitimate to use the powers they have, but once they decide that their legitimacy is that little bit greater, they are likely to use those powers far more frequently in future than they have in the past. They might go even further: it might already have occurred to them that they could filibuster on controversial Bills so as to get their way. That would be even easier if there were some public support for the stance that they adopted.

Mr. Ian Bruce: I can see that the right hon. Gentleman is nearing the end of his speech. I am following his argument closely and wonder whether he has concluded that he would prefer the total abolition of the second Chamber.

Mr. Sheldon: The main reason for keeping the other Chamber is the quinquennial Act. Under that Act, Parliament sits for five years and this House—this House alone, were the House of Lords to be abolished—can overturn that Act at a throw, if it so desires. There has to be some method of providing for that eventuality. As far as the principle of abolition is concerned, if the House of Commons behaved as a proper House of Commons and acted where it thought fit, the need for that second Chamber would be greatly reduced.

Mr. Benn: I have followed my right hon. Friend's argument and agree with it. However, he spoke about the dangers of new-found legitimacy in the transitional House of Lords: would he go so far as to argue, as I would, that the one point where the Lords are likely use that legitimacy is to frustrate the second stage, for if the second stage were to be at all radical, they would be committing suicide by accepting it? With their new-found legitimacy, would they not frustrate the second stage to save life peers, the remaining hereditary peers and everyone else in that Chamber?

Mr. Sheldon: In my idle moments, I have pictured some of the matters on which the transitional House of Lords might use its powers, and the one that my right hon. Friend suggests is undoubtedly one that has occurred to me. It would be easier for the Lords to use those powers on the not infrequent occasions where there was some support for their position.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): My right hon. Friend is being extremely generous in giving way. It is true that, in stage 1 when the hereditary Lords—other than the 91 remaining—have gone, the Lords might have a feeling of greater legitimacy, but surely, if stage 2 were to produce an entirely directly elected House, such action to frustrate it would be a direct challenge to the House of Commons?

Mr. Sheldon: There is no doubt about that, but I am not currently concerned with stage 2. Lord Cranborne might yet see his dream come true, and that is what frightens me.

Once we start to alter the balance of the two Houses, we must not think that the long-standing conventions will continue to apply. Once change begins, we cannot know the use to which such reform will be put. What we can be sure of is that, even without changes to the Lords' powers, far greater use will be made of them. In addition, the 91 hereditaries might come into their own. When my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House said, in answer to me, that the powers would remain unaltered, she did so on the basis that stage 1 would last for only a limited time. The longer stage 1 remains, the more problems will be caused to this Parliament and the next. That has to be dealt with during the Committee stage of the Bill before us.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next hon. Member, I remind the House that time is getting on and many hon. Members have been in the Chamber all day yesterday and all day today. It is only fair to point out that, if speeches are shorter, some of those hon. Members will be called.

8 pm

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): The right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) and I once travelled together to China. He will remember the Yeats poem "Lapis Lazuli":

> "Two Chinamen, behind them a third . . .
> Above them flies a long-legged bird
> The symbol of longevity".

The right hon. Gentleman and I are not young, and it is a happy conceit, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that you should have yoked me with him in this debate.

The debate yesterday, almost all of which I attended, was perfectly relevant to the topic and therefore worthy of it. However, the response of the House to the Government's intentions could have risen higher and been more worthy of the great history of the other place if the Government had not been so preoccupied to descry it and so little to praise it.

I do not blame the Government for using statistics to make their points, although, in his account of the popular vote for the two major parties at the previous general election, the hon. Member for Gillingham (Mr. Clark) was more accurate in the last Back-Bench speech made for the Government last night in column 684 of yesterday's *Hansard* than was the Leader of the House in the first Front-Bench speech in column 613. I appreciate that I myself am more literate than numerate, but I can plead to having done advanced applied statistics at postgraduate level at Harvard, so my criticism of the Government for a high concentration on the numerical and a compensating aversion to the verbal is not the product of statistical unfamiliarity but due to a preference of taste.

Of course I understand why the Government have preferred the statistical route, and I am not gainsaying the particular arguments that they sustain, other than referring to the curious inaccuracy of the Leader of the House. Nor am I criticising the Government for wishing to reverse what they see as a perceived party political disadvantage. I could not blame any Government, let alone one so sensitive to party political advantage as this one, for wanting to redress an honest disadvantage under which they felt they were suffering. I am only sorry that they

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should have felt it necessary to overdo the immediate arguments against the hereditary peers to justify their lack of preparedness for comprehensive reform.

The Brookes are a smallish family—they run nowadays to more than 5,000 individuals worldwide but fewer than 10,000—but they spread into eight or 10 county branches in this kingdom. All the branches have a badger as their crest on the grounds that brock equals brooke, and the Gaelic for badger is broc. I have found a badger as far back as 1558 on a tomb in a church in Shropshire, while in Colebrooke in County Fermanagh, in a church of which it has been accurately remarked that most churches are dedicated to the glory of God but Colebrooke is dedicated to the Brookes, there are 18. Despite that longevity, my own county branch, which is in County Cavan via Cheshire, has never produced an hereditary peer under our name, although Holbein's drawing of Brooke Lord Cobham has a distinct look of my father.

I remark in parentheses, and as a declaration of interest, that the County Fermanagh branch in the next-door county produced in the last war Lord Alanbrooke and Lord Brookeborough, whose banners as knights of the garter hang from the beams of Colebrooke church and whose hereditary heirs still sit in the other House. My noble late father was a life peer and, at 91, my noble mother still is a life peer.

In a certain personal respect, I speak for my parents, who served directly in the other place for 36 years between them, which, by coincidence, was precisely the same number of years that they served between them on the old Hampstead borough council. I shall draw on that coincidence in a moment, but, before that, I want to record with pride that, in seven centuries of our parliamentary history, my parents were the first married couple to sit simultaneously on the Front Bench of either House, an achievement that anticipated by a single year the same one in this House when it was accomplished by the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) and Dr. John Dunwoody in the then Government.

The coincidence to which I referred is that both the bodies of which my parents were members for 36 years—Hampstead borough council and the House of Lords—have been the subject of drastic reform. The merger of Hampstead borough council with St. Pancras and Holborn into Camden chronologically followed the Herbert commission, which my late father established in the late 1950s and which in due course gave rise to the subsuming of the London county council into the Greater London council in 1965. It was, in short, the measured product of long deliberation and prudent preparation and in that respect wholly worthy of this great city.

The reform of the House of Lords—an institution at least 10 times older than the LCC and the old London boroughs when they were reformed—is being passed at a breakneck and seemingly unpremeditated pace. The right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) modestly took the credit for the royal commission, but the credit for that happening at all belongs to her Majesty's loyal Opposition for their campaign against the haphazard and ramshackle way in which the Government are handling the reform. Because they took no thought for the morrow, the Government now have to introduce the reform much faster than would have been necessary if there had been greater forethought—a charge that can be laid at the door of their whole constitutional project. As I remarked at an earlier stage, if you do not know where you are trying to get to, any road will get you there. After more than seven centuries, that is not worthy of this Parliament.

The hon. and learned Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews) referred to bricklayers. I have a criticism of the royal commission other than that it has an excessively short life due to the Government's unthinking folly. I served in the Whips Office and the Cabinet with my noble Friend Lord Wakeham. He has a considerable reputation as a fixer in the eyes of political journalists and, although historians will determine its eventual validity, the profession of fixer owes more to the role of a plumber than to that of an architect. Lord Wakeham's principal credential for the chairmanship seems to be that he belongs to the right union. The future House of Lords is in more than a little need of architecture, and in that I am saying more brutally what my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath) said gently.

The Government may justify their acquiescence in the Weatherill amendment on grounds of pragmatism, but it owes nothing to principle. The House of Lords has a great national past. In 1975, the Brussels Commission confessed that, for the first time, it had been outwitted, defeated and perplexed by a delegation from a national legislature. That was a scientific delegation consisting of Lord Ashby, Lord Hinton and Lord Zuckerman. When representatives of the Commission rang No. 10 the following day, they asked, "Why are you proposing to abolish the House of Lords?" Those were life peers, but the late Launcelot Fleming, who was successively Bishops of Portsmouth and Norwich, was a scientist of sufficient distinction to serve on the royal commission on environmental pollution in his own right.

On the hereditary side, the noble Earl Russell has all his father's genes and he is not alone among the hereditary peers. There are plenty of hereditary peers who sit as fellows of the Royal Society. Able Ministers from this place who have gone to the other place report that, when they speak in that massively knowledgeable forum, they experience the same nervousness that they experienced as small boys before going out to bat. Of course I acknowledge those who are lightly called working peers, but I see no significantly greater fault in a peer who sits in the other place because his ancestor gave money to Charles I than in one who sits there now because he has given money to the governing party of the day.

I fear that I am more sure that the Bill is not worthy of the Government's constitutional project—perhaps it is—because of the arguments that were deployed yesterday on its behalf. I cannot blame Back Benchers, because a lead is always given by the Front Bench, and I regard it as a trivialisation of what we are about that the Leader of the House spent so much time discussing taxpayer support for the 62 hereditary peers who live abroad when this Government have not even tried to answer the West Lothian question, the fault line of which still lies beneath their constitutional structures.

I am no great believer in focus groups, because I recall Dean Acheson's account in his great post-war book about a wartime episode when Cordell Hull said to President Roosevelt:

"Mr. President, this is not one of those occasions when we have enough time for you to wait while you learn where we want to be led."

It was clear from Labour Members' speeches yesterday that they have gone into the highways and byways of their constituencies—either spontaneously or under bleeper control—to verify opinion on the House of Lords. I cite the speeches of the hon Members for The Wrekin (Mr. Bradley) and for Gillingham. The hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) referred to his constituents. The hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Mr. Plaskitt) more spaciously told us what people wanted.

Although I am personally glad that the Labour Members are so close to their constituents, I have a different impression. It is contained in a wartime cartoon by Pont of *Punch*, in a series called "The British Character", in which two or three solid rustics are sitting silently in a public bar where a German radio broadcast is reporting,

"In England the people have been thrown into the wildest panic."

Much has been made of the inactivity in the House of Lords in the 88 years since 1911. I attribute that inactivity, beyond peradventure, to Pont's picture of the public bar and the fact that, over the past nine decades, there has been no public pressure for reform.

I offer the House two verses from the poem that G. K. Chesterton wrote after F. E. Smith had claimed that the Bill on Welsh disestablishment had shocked the conscience of every Christian community in Europe. It states:

"Are they clinging to their crosses, F. E. Smith,
Where the Breton boat-fleet tosses, are they Smith?
Do they, fasting, trembling, breeding,
Wait the news from this our city?
Groaning 'That's the Second Reading!'
Hissing 'There is still Committee!'
If the voice of Cecil falters,
If McKenna's point has pith,
Do they tremble for their altars? Do they Smith?
In the lands where Christians were, F. E. Smith,
In the little lands laid bare, Smith, O Smith,
Where the Turkish bands are busy
And the Tory name is blessed
Since they hailed the Cross of Dizzy
On the banners from the West!
Men don't think it half so hard if
Islam burns their kin and kith,
Since a curate lives in Cardiff saved by Smith."

The same perception of people's attitude to the House of Lords applies.

I do not resist the burial of the hereditary principle, but I insist that we do it decently, properly and honourably, and that we honour the most remarkable contribution made by hereditary peers to our constitution and our law making by the quality of whom we put in their place—more sensibly than the Government have so far started to do.

Professor Cannadine ended his notable book on the decline and fall of the British aristocracy with Lord Peter Wimsey's self-composed epitaph:

"Here lies an anachronism in the vague expectation of eternity".

I prefer, filially, to close my speech with another quotation of Lord Peter Wimsey:

"I have a cursed hankering after certain musty old values."

8.12 pm

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): This very important debate is about the basic issues of government, accountability and representation. Over the past two days, the Opposition have painted a picture of confusion and disarray. Numerous Opposition Members have told us that they reject the principle that the rights of heredity are superior to those of democratic accountability, yet, in addressing that issue, they have described the Bill using adjectives such as "sinister" and "vindictive". They have said that they want to hear what the detailed proposals for change might be, yet appear to reject the proposition that a royal commission should be—indeed, already is being—set up to consider such details.

The Bill is part of a proposal that shows the Government's determination to deal very positively with an issue which, until now, has proved intractable. It is extremely important that we all recognise the momentous opportunities that the Bill, and the process that it begins, puts in front of us. We have the opportunity to look again at our constitution, give a voice to people who have been denied a democratic voice and the right to be listened to, and reconsider issues of accountability and the representation of interests and people who, for far too long, have been excluded.

The issue of devolution in the United Kingdom and beyond has been mentioned by many hon. Members. I welcome devolution; it is about accountability, the need to give a focus to decisions that are often taken in a fragmented way, and identity. Those different aspects of devolution assume different importance in different parts of the United Kingdom. We are to have a Scottish Parliament, a Welsh Assembly, a Northern Ireland Assembly, a Greater London authority and a Council of the Isles.

In England, with the formation of regional development agencies—we shall have, at long last, a focus for economic activity in the regions—and in regional chambers, we see at last an attempt to bring together, on an indirectly elected basis for the moment, a forum in which issues to do with social structure, the economy and the environment can be debated, and in which strategies can be addressed and delivered. In the House only yesterday, the Leader of the House confirmed that it is proposed to restore the Standing Committee on the Regions.

We have therefore reached a position from which an elected base—even if only indirectly elected—could nominate members of a second Chamber, whatever we decide to call it. Regional chambers in England comprise elected representatives. They are appropriate bodies to nominate people for a reformed House of Lords. In that way, the voice of the regions would be heard, not just in the House of Commons, where it absolutely essential, but in a reformed second House. Such views could not only be heard but considered and acted on. That could be done in the context of the United Kingdom and, indeed, of Europe. We would no longer have to face the situation, which the Transport Sub-Committee of the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs described last week when referring to the fact that the promise of regional rail links with Europe had not been delivered, of the regions of England being "cheated".

[Mrs. Louise Ellman]

Such a system would provide an opportunity to consider the impact of proposed legislation on regions. It would provide a forum in which to consider the impact of spending policies on the regions and of wider European issues and the way in which the regions should influence those wider European policies.

Discussions in the reformed second Chamber would, of course, be only a part of the review of our constitution. There should be room, too, for the voice of the regions to be heard in this directly elected House of Commons. Indeed, I hope that, soon, regional chambers in England will be directly elected.

The regions of England are at different stages of readiness to move forward. The north-west is particularly well prepared, having worked with the public, private and voluntary sectors over the past eight years, in the North West Regional Association and the North West Partnership—and now, the north-west assembly—to put together strategies for training, economic development, transport and the environment, and to work with Europe. Indeed, such strategies are being enacted.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): I have been listening to the hon. Lady's speech with interest; she has obviously given considerably deeper thought to this matter than the Government appear to have done. I am intrigued by one aspect of her remarks. Why does she appear to hold the view that a second Chamber nominated by regional assemblies would better represent the interests of the regions than a directly elected second Chamber?

Mrs. Ellman: The constitution of the second Chamber, its membership, role and functions will be the subject of consideration by the royal commission that is being set up. I believe that part of the revised second Chamber should comprise elected representation. It is vital that the voice of the English regions should be heard in that Chamber, and regional chambers or assemblies, which are indirectly elected, would be appropriate bodies to nominate such representatives.

The proposition that I have advanced is a contribution to a major debate on which we are embarking. The Bill is of momentous importance. It begins to tackle an issue that has troubled so many people for so long, and it opens up new opportunities. I want to ensure that those will include an opportunity for the voice of the English regions to be heard and acted on. I hope that the royal commission will consider the proposal, and that the House will give it due consideration. I also hope that, when hon. Members speak about devolution, they will view it not as a weakness, but as a great strength for the United Kingdom and for every region of the country.

8.21 pm

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): We can all agree that the debate has been of a particularly high standard. The House is always at its best when our more senior Members take part and give us the benefit of their collective memory and collective wisdom.

Although I was ready to attack the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman) for starting her speech by somewhat misrepresenting the position of the Conservative party, she made an important contribution to the debate, as she was willing to say how she thought a second Chamber could contribute towards the better governance of the United Kingdom. That is exactly the approach of the Conservative party.

I should state at the outset that, whenever I have been asked whether I accepted the hereditary principle, I have replied that I would never be on the barricades trying to defend a principle that is clearly indefensible, but that we in this place must defend a second Chamber that works rather well. When we replace it, we must replace it with something better.

I am, perhaps, fortunate to be in this place because of the hereditary principle—not because I have any claims on that basis, but because, in its great wisdom, my constituency has elected as two of its past four Members of Parliament a member of one of the hereditary families who, on the death of his father, has had to give up the seat. When Victor Montague moved from South Dorset, the seat was, admittedly, won by the Labour party.

My predecessor as the Member for South Dorset, Robert Cranborne, decided to go early so that he could do other things—indeed, he told us that he had to look after his acres of roofs and earn some money to maintain them. I was fortunate to be selected when one of the future hereditary peers decided to move on, so I am grateful to have gained my seat in this place as a result of the hereditary principle.

We must find ways of improving our second Chamber. Much that has been said this evening should be considered carefully by the royal commission. We have heard some excellent suggestions. It worries me, however, that the Prime Minister does not seem to want a political balance in the second Chamber, so that, when the Conservatives are in power, the Conservatives would have control in that Chamber, as would Labour when the Labour party was in power.

It would be daft for us to make the second Chamber more democratic and thereby to create a constant coalition where the Liberal Democrats of the day could enter a coalition with whichever party was in opposition to block the Government's plans. The Prime Minister should consider that carefully. By increasing the democratic accountability of the House of Lords, we would automatically give it more power. That is the difficulty that we all face.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: It does not necessarily follow that, if the second Chamber were democratically elected, it would be in a position to challenge the primacy of the House of Commons. That all depends on the allocation of powers between the two Chambers.

Mr. Bruce: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, but the Bill does not change the powers of the other place. It puts in place a Chamber that could go on and on. We must be cautious as we proceed. Many Labour Members object strongly to the House of Lords and are convinced that it is necessary to get rid of the hereditary principle. I hope to persuade them that there should be fundamental amendments to the Bill, or that it should be thrown out.

The second Chamber is willing to give way to the primacy of the House of Commons because the Lords know that there is no democratic basis for them to say, "We know better." Nevertheless, in a typically British

way, the institution works. When we discuss reform, especially the first stage, we must ensure that we put in its place a Chamber that works better.

Maria Eagle: Does the hon. Gentleman recognise the fact that the upper House as currently constituted works better for his party than for any radical party, whether Liberal or Labour? It is much less likely to interfere with his party's legislation because of the in-built majority and its inherent sympathy with his party.

Mr. Bruce: The hon. Lady goes on at length with her point, but there were 240 defeats of a Conservative Government. The democratic legitimacy of the House of Lords when there is a Conservative Government is much greater. If Members of the House of Lords take the Conservative Whip and behave as Conservatives most of the time, they feel happy to challenge the will of a Conservative Government, whereas if they challenge the will of a Labour Government, they would be working against the democratic mandate given to that Government. That has happened time and again.

Mr. Hayes: Perhaps my hon. Friend will acknowledge, in answer to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle), that the essential difference between the two Houses is that the House of Lords is less partisan. The people who take the whip in the House of Lords take a far less severe whip than Members of this Chamber. They need to prove nothing, do not need to impress their party leaders and, very often, are going nowhere. Therefore the atmosphere in the House of Lords is quite different. The issue is to do with the style, as well as the content, of that Chamber.

Mr. Bruce: My hon. Friend had made a point that I would have made. I leave it in his hands, and it was made much more eloquently than if I had made it.

I am not defending leaving the House of Lords as it is, but we must have a plan to go forward and achieve something better. I am also keen that people who enter the House of Lords through the hereditary principle and decide to work—effectively for nothing, other than expenses—should be acknowledged for what they have done. People with enormous knowledge, who have worked for 10 or 20 years in the House of Lords, could be stripped away from us.

I am a vice-chairman of the European Informatics Market Group, and two hereditary peers—Lord Renwick and Lord Chelmsford—are the mainstays and do all the work. I am keen that, whatever we get in place of the House of Lords, we have similar people who are willing to put that sort of dedication into doing a job of work that helps Parliament. For example, the work of the Select Committee on Science and Technology has been acknowledged.

We also need that extra attribute, which no one has mentioned. A second Chamber slows down legislation, which is very important.

Mr. Wareing: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bruce: I do not have a lot of time and I will make progress, if I may.

A second Chamber slows down legislation and allows the public to realise that something is going on. Many people realise that there will be change—for example, in their industry—only when a Bill is debated in the House of Lords or the House of Commons. The newspapers alert the public to it by reporting the opening debates. People have time to table amendments in the second Chamber, which is often where a Government realise that there is something wrong with legislation. They then table Government amendments in the second Chamber, whether the Commons or the Lords—

Mr. Wareing: We do not need a second Chamber to do that.

Mr. Bruce: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, but Ministers are suggesting that we should have a second Chamber. He should fight for what he believes in.

I have reached the point where Labour Members may like to think about whether they will get the deal that they were promised by Ministers—the abolition of the hereditary principle and a reformed House of Lords. The Labour party manifesto may not have said that we will achieve a reformed and more democratic House of Lords, but I know that Labour Members are keen for that to happen.

If Labour Members are willing to let the Government off the hook in respect of the first phase by saying, "We have now fulfilled our manifesto commitment," there could be many Parliaments before any further reform takes place. If the prize, and the incentive to reform the House of Lords, is to get rid of the hereditary principle, Labour Members who want that to happen should not allow the Government to get rid of the hereditary principle one minute and say the next, "We have done the urgent thing, so things can go on and on."

I hope that I am not giving away confidences by saying that I was in a meeting with the leader of my party the other day. He went round the 10 of us in the room, and there were about 15 different opinions about what we should have in place of the House of Lords. That does not happen only in the Conservative party; it happens in the Liberal party and the Labour party. Those who have listened to the debate know why reform of the House of Lords has not yet happened: we have not agreed what we will put in its place. Taking the pressure off the Government, by allowing them to get rid of most of the hereditary peers, will stop them having to make those difficult decisions.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) made some excellent suggestions. He went through what the House of Lords could work at, and that is the way that we should be going. We want to achieve reform in this Parliament, and it is right to do so. If the Government try to achieve reform in two stages, they will simply end up with imperfect changes in the first stage. They should be rejected by the House.

8.34 pm

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): I have been trying to catch your eye since the beginning of the debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker, so I have been listening throughout to the speeches of Conservative Members. Some were interesting. The right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath) at least gave an unequivocal

[Dr. Stephen Ladyman]

commitment to a reformed second Chamber, and we heard a moving contribution from the hon. Member for Aldridge–Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd). Unfortunately, the hon. Gentleman is no longer in his place, but I agreed with much of what he said. After slightly less than two years in this place, it is clear to me that all of Parliament needs some type of reform.

Although I strongly support the Prime Minister and the work that he is doing, it is clear to me that a future Prime Minister could turn out to be Caligula, and, under our current system, could make his horse a proconsul. Unfortunately, little could be done to prevent him or her from doing so.

The reform of Parliament is plainly necessary, but the hon. Member for Aldridge–Brownhills should note that at least the Labour party has embarked on the process. There may be dangers in what we are beginning to do, but at least we are trying. We cannot cross oceans until we are prepared to lose sight of the shore, and that is what the Labour party is trying to do.

Other interesting speeches have been made by Opposition Members. The hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) made what I considered to be a particularly good speech. I never thought that I would hear myself say this in the House, but I suggest that hon. Members read it. I am equally horrified to say that I was strangely drawn to some of the ideas advanced by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth); and there was a delightful moment when the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) seemed to be trying to convince us that Members of the other House should be neither appointed nor elected, but should somehow be caught with rod and line.

With those exceptions, however, Opposition speeches have been uniformly depressing. Conservative Member after Conservative Member has risen to tell us that he or she supports the idea of abandoning the hereditary principle, but will not support the Bill. Conservative Member after Conservative Member has risen to claim that we need reform of the House of Lords, but not yet. Conservative Member after Conservative Member has risen to claim that there is a need for a free-thinking and independent House of Lords, yet Conservative Members are prepared to continue with a system that allows the dim and the devious to keep their place in that House as long as they are shackled to the Conservative party.

Let me spell out what I believe to be obvious: a vote against the Bill is a vote in favour of the hereditary principle. We are discussing what is essentially a simple Bill. The Leader of the House described it as exquisite in its simplicity, and she was right. Clause 1 is the only substantive clause, and it is absolutely explicit in its meaning. All the other measures in the Bill provide for adjustments and new arrangements following from that clause.

It is clear to me that, as clause 1 is entirely concerned with the abandoning of the hereditary principle, anyone who votes against the Bill will vote for that principle. No spinning can change that; no dressing up by the Opposition can change it. Either the Opposition are for the hereditary principle, or they are against it. By their deeds we shall know them: if they vote against the Bill, they will be voting for the hereditary principle.

I start from this premise—if Parliament is to be fair and democratic, all parliamentarians must have one quality in common: they must be replaceable. I am the Member of Parliament for South Thanet. I have many weaknesses—I am sure that my constituents know my weaknesses—but, whatever weaknesses I have, I have one quality that should commend me to my constituents: I am replaceable. My predecessor, Mr. Jonathan Aitken, was also replaceable. If my constituents had not replaced him at the last election, I suspect that they would be in the process of replacing him now; but, if he were an hereditary peer, he would still be a parliamentarian.

At the last election, the constituents of Tatton decided to replace their Member of Parliament, because—rightly or wrongly—they considered that he did not measure up to their standards. If he were an hereditary peer, he would still be in that Chamber and would still be influencing our legislation.

Mr. Brady: I hope that the hon. Gentleman is going to explain how it is that the gentlemen to whom he has referred would not still be part of the legislature if they were life peers. His whole argument seems to be flawed. He says that they would be here if they were hereditary peers; they would also be here under the Government's proposals.

Dr. Ladyman: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right and I shall deal with that point in a moment, if he will just be patient.

The House of Commons has authority for one reason and one reason only: the people give us that authority. Because of that authority, although we are not builders, we can build houses; although we do not work as teachers, we can teach; although we are not nurses or doctors, we can cause people to be cared for and treated. People give us that authority knowing that, if we abuse it, we can be replaced. As it stands, the House of Lords cannot be replaced. Hereditary peers and their successors sit there for their lives without ever having to take responsibility for what they choose to do.

It follows—to me at least—that any reform of the second Chamber that takes away the hereditary principle is an improvement. It is a start in the process of reform. Anyone who votes against the Bill is denying us that improvement and that start.

The interim second Chamber is, by definition, replaceable. It will contain life peers—people who have been appointed to be there. If the Cross-Bench amendment is tabled in the upper Chamber and accepted, it may even contain people who are currently hereditary peers, but they are replaceable: when the reforms are completed, they will be replaced. I have absolute confidence in the commitment of the Government and of Labour Members to push through that second-stage reform. A vote against the Bill has to be—there can be no other interpretation—a vote for the continuance of parliamentarians who are there by right of birth.

Other Conservative Members have tried to argue that the interim Chamber is no improvement, that the Lords is independent and that it should be left alone while the royal commission deliberates. The independence of the House

of Lords is a myth. My parliamentary neighbour, the hon. Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale), has recently written in our local newspaper:

"The House of Lords is eccentric, antiquated and undemocratic. It also works."

My message to him is: three out of four is not bad. It is eccentric, antiquated and undemocratic, but it does not work. It has conducted no reasonable scrutiny of Conservative party legislation over recent decades. The Lords is politically dominated by the Conservative party, which has a majority of 3:1. It is a simple fact that, during the previous Labour Government, defeats of Government legislation as a percentage of all Divisions in the House of Lords never fell below 50 per cent. They averaged 5 per cent. during the subsequent 18 years of Conservative rule.

A few years ago, more than 400 Tories were bussed into the House of Lords to push through the Maastricht treaty without a referendum. Those independent, free-thinking Conservatives went through the Lobby and voted for something that every one of them now says is wrong, and that the entire Front-Bench team of the Conservative Opposition in the House of Commons claims to be wrong.

Those free thinkers allowed the poll tax on to the statute book without a whimper. They sold the railways cheap with hardly a whimper. They are not independent, free-thinking spirits, as they are made out to be. They are Conservatives root and branch. That is why the Opposition want them to stay there.

Let me deal with why the Bill does not include a complete reform of the House of Lords. I want to raise something that has not so far been mentioned in the debate—the so-called Salisbury convention. The Salisbury convention requires, or at least expects, Members of the upper Chamber to allow legislation through that Chamber if the proposals were included in the Government's manifesto.

The Government's manifesto is clear and unequivocal on Lords reform. It states:

"The House of Lords must be reformed. As an initial, self-contained reform, not dependent on further reform in the future, the right of hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House of Lords will be ended by statute. This will be the first stage in a process of reform to make the House of Lords more democratic and representative. The legislative powers of the House of Lords will remain unaltered."

The Bill is absolutely and explicitly tied to the manifesto. There can be no question but that the Government are doing what we said we would do in our manifesto. If we were to allow further reforms to the House of Lords to be included in the Bill, Opposition Members would today be saying that we are exceeding the authority of our mandate, and that our legislation should be opposed on that basis. In the House of Lords, the Tory hereditary peers would be saying that the Salisbury convention did not apply and that they could therefore block the legislation. The Government have done what is required tactically to ensure that the Bill is passed by the House of Lords.

Some of my colleagues have been in the Chamber for almost 10 hours and would like to speak in the debate. I shall therefore conclude my comments. The Bill is a vital piece of reforming legislation; there is nothing to be feared in it. Some of my right hon. and hon. Friends have suggested that reform may not proceed to the second stage, but they should not have such fears. All Labour Members are absolutely committed to second-stage reform. First, however, we have to take that first step. We have to lose sight of the shore if we are to cross the ocean. I commend the Bill to the House.

8.47 pm

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): I am delighted to follow the speech of the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman). I wish that I shared his supreme conviction that stage 2 will follow stage 1. I suspect that the Government have not made detailed proposals because they do not know in detail how they will accomplish reform. Nevertheless, they have asked a royal commission to report, in only 10 months, on one of the most complex constitutional issues of our time.

This has been a very important constitutional debate. We have had some very high-class speeches, notably from the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) and from two former Prime Ministers, my right hon. Friends the Members for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) and for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath). I want to refer to all three of their speeches.

I should, first, mention the Government's attitude on the issue. The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons, in her speech yesterday, clearly expressed her political prejudices against hereditary peers per se. She said:

"Anything would be better"—[*Official Report*, 1 February 1999; Vol. 324, c. 614.]

than the current system. Her statement truly demonstrates that she is introducing the legislation not because she wants to improve our current legislative structures, but purely out of political spite.

My constituents are not writing to me in droves on this constitutional issue. However, they did elect me to this place to guard jealously the great democratic principles on which our country was founded, and to look after their welfare and interests.

Perhaps this specific plank in our constitutional change—merely abolishing hereditary peers—is not a huge one. However, it assumes much greater importance when one considers what might follow that change. If we place the change into the overall context of the Government's constitutional changes, we begin to understand how radically the United Kingdom might be altered in only four or five years of this Labour Government.

Let us consider the constitutional changes that the Government have made. I think that, once the people of the United Kingdom realise how the Government have sold them down the river, they will start to react against them. The Government have embarked on passing a great body of constitutional change—devolving government to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland; changing how our judiciary operates; enshrining in law the European convention on human rights; encouraging judicial review—by altering profoundly the operation of our judiciary and Parliament.

Now, the Government are reforming the House of Lords, but they do not have a clue about what they want to put in its place. They have asked a royal commission to report in just 10 months. I hope that, having considered

[Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown]

the issue, the royal commission will tell the Government that it is too complex to be addressed in just 10 months. I am not against change and nor is my party, but if we are to do the job properly and look at the matter in depth, as it deserves, we need longer than 10 months.

I applaud my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon for asking that, following the constitutional change, the Joint Committee be given a locus in thoroughly investigating the royal commission and have the power to reject any part of its findings. Parliament must assert its right of supremacy over the royal commission. It would be totally intolerable to do otherwise.

An assertion has been made that somehow the in-built Conservative majority in the House of Lords is a good reason for reforming it. I have looked at the statistics. Research paper 98/104 "Lords Reform: Background statistics" produced by the Library states:

"The average number of defeats in the Lords is 23 per session"

and that, from 1970 to 1998,

"the average of Government defeats per session under Labour Governments is 63 compared with 8 for Conservative Governments."

So, we can nail once and for all the assertion that the in-built Conservative majority needs to be addressed.

Much has been said today about the Bill abolishing hereditary peers, the transitional arrangements contained in clause 4 and how the transition is to be handled. The White Paper deals in detail with what is envisaged during the transition and subsequently. It has already constrained the work of the royal commission because it assumes that the new House of Lords will be appointed by some system or another. If anyone does not believe that, I need only quote from chapter 1, the executive summary, which states:

"The system of appointment of life peers to the House of Lords will be reviewed. Our objective will be to ensure that over time party appointees as life peers more accurately reflect the proportion of votes cast at the previous general election."

It then slightly contradicts itself by saying:

"No one political party should seek a majority in the House of Lords".

In my mind, there is only one question to be addressed. It concerns how the power of the Executive will be held to account. I am a democrat. I do not like the power of Parliament progressively being reduced. Even under the Conservative Government—and certainly under the present Government—the power of the Executive has been increased progressively. My right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon referred to some of the measures that have been introduced during this Parliament—Prime Minister's questions take place in just one half-hour session and there has been an increase in secondary legislation. Indeed, under this year's Finance Bill, the entire arrangements for introducing the euro were referred to secondary legislation.

The power of the House to scrutinise the Executive is progressively being reduced. The right hon. Member for Chesterfield was quite clear about the huge power that the Prime Minister has in his patronage. He has been delegated the power to commit the country to war, to sign treaties and to appoint commissioners and bishops. The Prime Minister already has huge power.

I come now to the Bill's potential consequences. Unlike the hon. Member for South Thanet, I doubt whether the Bill will move to phase 2 because of its complexity. The appointment system is fraught with danger. Indeed, my intervention in the Minister's speech this afternoon proved the point that the Prime Minister will still have the ultimate veto over who is appointed to the commission. That means that it cannot be truly independent.

We have to consider alternatives. I believe that the most legitimate alternative is an elected second Chamber. I shall deal with the issue in some depth, because some of my hon. Friends might be a little surprised to hear me say that. I am concerned to ensure that the calibre of the existing Members of the House of Lords is maintained. The current system works because we have people of eminence and experience in almost every field. They are thoroughly equipped to debate and scrutinise the legislation brought forward by this House and to tell us when we are making mistakes and ask us to think again. That deliberative, delaying power is the reason for the existence of the second Chamber.

If an appointments system will not work, we have to consider an elected system. In that case, the Members will have to be paid, which would considerably increase the cost of the House of Lords, contrary to what the notes on clauses say. The current cost of administering and running the House of Lords is about £42 million. The cost of administering the House of Commons is almost £260 million. An elected House of Lords would be likely to result in considerably greater costs.

An elected second Chamber has one great argument in its favour. If its elections coincided with a general election to this place, the potential for political patronage would be huge because it would be likely to be of the same political colour as the Government. However, if its elections fell in the middle of the cycle of elections to the House of Commons, the situation would be entirely different and could be highly advantageous. If the Government were popular, the House of Lords would still be of the same political colour and the Government would have no difficulty in getting their manifesto commitments through both Houses. However, if, as has often been the case, the Government were unpopular, the House of Lords would be likely to be of a different political colour and would act as a check on the Executive.

That has a great deal to commend it. However, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup made clear, having elections in the middle of the electoral cycle of the Commons would need fixed-term Parliaments for the House of Commons. I believe that that is a good idea. It would remove one of the Prime Minister's great powers of patronage—the ability to call an election when it suits him. The Government are elected on a manifesto. They should carry out that programme in full and then go to the country at a known date after four or five years. That would allow the elections to the House of Lords to be in mid-cycle.

There are a host of difficulties to be overcome in thinking about the possible operation of stage 2. The Government have acted with undue haste: out of pure political spite to meet their prejudices against hereditary peers, they have brought forward a Bill that will lead to a situation that they have no idea how to resolve. My constituents are more concerned about the health service, the education system, the economy, jobs, and how they are to get on in Europe. They are not concerned about the

minutiae of how democracy works. However, the issue is vital. Our history has been built on democracy. I do not want the Government to alter the balance of the country during their five-year term. I shall vote against the Bill tonight and I shall give evidence to the royal commission on how difficult coming up with an alternative might be.

9 pm

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): I congratulate all hon. Members who, like me, have been here for 13 hours over yesterday and today, waiting for a chance to speak in the debate. The debate has been interesting, and I have listened carefully. I have not intervened, and I was rather hurt that the hon. Member for Aldridge–Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) did not respond when I tried to intervene earlier this evening. I am glad to have the chance to speak now.

It has been interesting to see the Conservative party in denial about the link that dare not speak its name—the link between the Conservative party in this House and the Conservatives in the other place. I must say to the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton–Brown) that you got your statistics the wrong way around. Quoting from the document that you raised in your speech—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am getting rather tired of having to repeat this night after night, but I must be consistent with hon. Members. The form of address that we use in this House must be applied consistently.

Caroline Flint: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. As we enter the graveyard shift, I apologise for any tiredness that has led me to forget parliamentary etiquette.

The document to which the hon. Member for Cotswold referred states that, from 1970-71 to 1997-98, the average number of Government defeats per Session under a Labour Government was 63, compared with eight under a Conservative Government. That makes the point.

It is interesting that we are having this debate in a year when we celebrate two anniversaries—although "celebrate" may be the wrong word. Last weekend saw the 350th anniversary of the execution of Charles I. This year, we see the 400th anniversary of the birth of Oliver Cromwell. As I am sure hon. Members are aware, those two were the protagonists in a situation that led to the abolition of the House of Lords—the only abolition that has occurred in parliamentary history.

When I show schoolchildren from Don Valley around the House of Commons and the House of Lords, the story that they like best—and write to me afterwards about—is that of Charles II coming back after the restoration, digging up the body of Oliver Cromwell, cutting off his head and putting it on a spike in Westminster hall. However, Charles II contributed to something else—perhaps more than many monarchs, he contributed to the providing of hereditary titles for services rendered in the bedroom.

Mr. Evans: When the hon. Lady is talking to schoolchildren, does she talk to them about parliamentary democracy, checking the power of the Executive, the powers of the Whips, how she is dictated to by the pager from Walworth road and the spin doctors—and about how that adds to democracy in this country?

Caroline Flint: I speak to my constituents and schoolchildren about the struggle within Parliament for the rights of universal suffrage, and about how many centuries it took to achieve universal suffrage against the dominance of the landed gentry. I am delighted that, by abolishing the hereditary principle, we will do something to alter the balance from the two thirds of those in the House of Lords who still represent the landed gentry towards those from other, more diverse walks of life.

It is a sad reflection that, after 18 years of government—and despite all the rhetoric that we have heard yesterday and today from all the born-again Tory reformers—the Tory party's election manifesto for 1997 said:

> "We have demonstrated we are not against change where it is practicable and beneficial. But fundamental changes which have not been fully thought through—such as opposition proposals on the House of Lords—would be extremely damaging. We will oppose change for change's sake."

That was all the Tories had to say. They did not say that, as a point of principle, they supported the abolition of the hereditary principle. The right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) did himself no service by pontificating this evening on all the ways in which we could modernise and change this House, given that he had a fair opportunity to do something when he held the reins of power.

We will not expect any executions during the passage of the Bill, or through the debate that we have started and to which the Government have given oxygen and life—something that would never have happened under a Conservative Government. We will discuss, inquire and explore the modern ways in which Parliament can work as we move into the next millennium.

This first step is part of that process. It is a modest proposal to undo the rights of 760-odd families who believe that they have the right to be represented for time eternal in our legislative Chambers. Such job security has been afforded to no one in my constituency: not only a job for life but a job for successors for hundreds of years through an accident of birth.

I say no one, but in fact the 12th Earl of Scarborough is my near neighbour. He is a very nice man whom I have met on several occasions. He owns considerable land in my constituency and elsewhere. I have nothing against him personally—he seemed amiable and is generally well regarded—but I note that he has not taken the oath since the general election and that the Library records show that he has not spoken in the Chamber at any time in the past 11 years.

I have no objection to such self-restraint: in one respect, it is commendable, and I am pleased that my local lord has not taken part in the wrecking of Government legislation in the other place since the 1997 general election. I do not believe that hereditary peers should be entitled to participation in the formation of legislation.

Like my noble earl, many Members of the House of Lords do not attend. We have had a discussion about scrutiny, and that prompts the question: who is doing the scrutiny and asking the questions in the other place? Thanks again to the Library, we find that only 508 peers out of the 1,294 have attended more than a third—76—of the sitting days. Of the 508 who do the bulk of the work—they should be respected for that—222 are hereditary peers. They represent only a third of the hereditaries, but in such numbers they have considerable sway.

[Caroline Flint]

As we approach the millennium, it should not be morally acceptable for our democratic process to be influenced by the self-selection of 766 people who gained their title by an accident of birth. It is an historical legacy that the Bill will rectify.

The Opposition have asked whether we have a right to proceed in this way. I will not repeat what my hon. Friends have said about our manifesto, but I believe that, even if the manifesto did not have all the answers, it certainly set in train a series of events by which we will gain a more representative second Chamber. The starting point for that is getting rid of the hereditary principle.

We are not creating an elected dictatorship. Our manifesto commitment is clear: to make the House of Lords more democratic and more representative. We have the first Prime Minister ever who is willing to relinquish the patronage that many other Prime Ministers have used. We are not interested in fixing the reform of the second Chamber. Some Opposition Members say that we are going too slowly and others that we are going too fast. It is clear that we have started a debate that would never have taken place under the Conservatives, had they won at the general election. They did not win, and our manifesto commitment was pretty clear to the members of the British public who voted.

I hope that, after the Bill is enacted, we can put some of the vested interests to one side and consider how we can reach political consensus on the second Chamber. I believe that the bicameral arrangement works in most major advanced democracies. Only a few Members have suggested that a single Chamber should be the answer.

I think that we would agree that we want a body that is free to scrutinise legislation and Government. The second Chamber, even in its present form, has sometimes excelled at scrutiny, and many refinements to legislation have been made by successive Governments following representations from the Lords. That role should be protected and maintained. Would we all not agree that such a Chamber has the potential to play an effective role and be independent of the Commons if no party has a majority in it? The Prime Minister said that that would be considered.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I am very appreciative of the hon. Lady's comments about my ancestor, Oliver Cromwell.

Is not the role of the House of Lords far more important than its constitution? It is as if we were interviewing for a job without writing the job specification. Does the hon. Lady agree that a large amount of the attention of the House has been concentrated on who should be there rather than on what they should do, but that the latter is the far more important issue? I am glad that she is coming to that subject.

Caroline Flint: It is very important that we consider the role of the second Chamber. It may not be a first priority for the public; certainly in Don Valley people are concerned about jobs, health and education. However, underpinning the development of policies in those areas is the creation of opportunities for our constituents to have a say in how the country is run. That is true whether we are considering the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly, regional and local government or this place. We do not yet have all the answers, but we have created a debate and that is one of the purposes of the House.

It has been suggested that the second Chamber should be more representative, and I agree. No one denies the wealth of political, religious, diplomatic and business experience that is represented in the upper House, but I suggest that it overwhelmingly comes from the life peers. The hereditaries can claim to represent but few. If we look at the statistics, we see that they are mainly men, they mainly went to one public school, they are mainly from the landed gentry, they mainly went to Oxford or Cambridge and they represent the gentlemen's clubs and country life of the old establishment.

One benchmark of a proper second Chamber is a more representative spread of gender, race and social class. On those criteria, the hereditaries are among the least representative of all those in our political and governmental institutions. One irony of the statistics about the hereditaries is that they have a broader age range among their number, because death leads to replacement with a younger generation. However, that on its own cannot justify their presence.

One feature of the debate has been the Conservatives displaying synthetic outrage that we dare to remove the influence of hereditary peers before proceeding to establish the final shape of the new Chamber. The reason for doing so is simple: we should not allow 760 families, above the many millions in this country, to play a key role in determining what will replace them. *[Interruption.]* The history books are littered with the problems of democratically elected Governments who have sought to reform the House of Lords. It is only in the past 100 years that the House of Commons has even managed to establish any dominance. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady. If the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) cannot behave himself, I shall ask him to leave.

Caroline Flint: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The Reform Act of 1832 was passed by the Lords at the third attempt, after riots nationwide provoked by the refusal to accept the reforms, and only then because the Lords feared a revolution. That Act did not even introduce universal suffrage—far from it—but it enfranchised one in five of the male population and brought about a redistribution of power that proved irreversible. The landed gentry conceded power to save their skins. What a noble principle.

The same happened with the Parliament Act 1911. Having defeated the Asquith Government's Budgets, the Lords finally conceded the limitation of their powers to block legislation for two years only after a general election and the threat of the creation of 500 new life peers to dilute their reactionary power. Again, reform was accepted only to salvage the bulk of their power and position. Such is the influence of those 760 families that only in 1949, under a Labour Government, were their delaying powers finally limited to one year.

The battle to defend the entrenched power of the hereditary peerage, with its inbuilt Conservative majority, is not an honourable one. As we mark its passing, history should record its finer moments. The poll tax would not

have been introduced in its final form, but for the peers' votes. Nor would rail privatisation. Those are hardly great victories of the people, nor are they the conscience of the nation holding Governments of all persuasions in check. Tory Administrations were defeated in the House of Lords just over 13 times on average per Parliament, but the Wilson-Callaghan Labour Government were defeated more than 68 times a Session. Nor do the Lords respect election mandates. This Government have a huge mandate and a manifesto of considerable detail, but that has not stopped the House of Lords defeating the Blair Government 33 times in the first Session, including halting the passage of one Bill altogether.

It is little wonder that we believe that it would be wrong in principle and reactionary in practice to allow those 760 families unduly to influence the shape of the second Chamber. However, there is a further dimension. A composite Bill that included abolition of the hereditary principle plus consideration of the new structure would risk one element overshadowing the other or neither being given the time or detailed consideration that they both deserve. Done systematically and carefully, the two-stage approach will ensure a full and detailed debate on the merits of reform.

The reality is today's decisive step. The boldest measure of British constitutional reform for centuries, it will free up thinking and move the debate forward. The Tories will no longer be able to call on their slumbering squirearchy to attempt to thwart an elected Labour Government. That is what they tried to do over handgun reform and the national minimum wage. They called on the same people to defend privilege as were exemplified in the assisted places scheme. There will be a more positive, forward-looking debate after the royal commission reports. Over the coming weeks, we can focus on the issue that is at the heart of this long-overdue reform.

We sat through the debate yesterday, waiting for Conservatives to defend the rights of hereditary peers. What we witnessed was Conservatism in confusion: one after another, Conservative Members proclaimed support for clause 1, which provides for the exclusion of the hereditary peers. Nowadays, it must be compulsory for Conservatives to carry in their pockets two versions of every policy. The Tories used to be defenders of an age-old constitution which—supposedly—served the country well for centuries. Suddenly, they are ditching their allies among the landed gentry.

What a disappointment. Where is that Conservative backbone, the stiff upper lip? Yesterday, the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) talked about the Alamo; I suggest that we are witnessing Hague's last stand. The Conservatives are adrift, rudderless and leaderless. Not so long ago, they condemned the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly: suddenly, over the weekend, they began saying, "We're going to make it work, we're going to make it happen." The reason is that they are having to follow this Government's lead in supporting modern reform of our institutions.

How many more about-turns will we see when the Government prove the Conservatives wrong and show that there will be a sincere and full debate on reform of the House of Lords? As sure as eggs is eggs, what is happening here today is what happened with the debates about the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. There is nothing like the prospect of another defeat and the certainty of reform to make the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) break cover, ditch all principle and leave his troops to take the flak.

On this issue, the Leader of the Opposition has already had to sack people and accept resignations. No leader has ever faced such a crisis so early in his career. It might induce pity, if the Conservative position were not so ridiculous at the outset.

I look forward to the House of Commons giving the Bill a Second Reading tonight. I look forward joining my hon. Friends in bidding farewell to the hereditary peers. As we go through the Division Lobbies, it is possible that we shall hear a resounding cry of "Tally ho!"

9.18 pm

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): I shall take up only one point from the speech of the hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint). That is the suggestion that Conservatives are in deep disarray over House of Lords reform, in contrast to the complete unity displayed by other parties. In fact, today we have heard differences of opinion from all around the House. There have been both convinced unicameralist and convinced bicameralist speeches from Labour Members, and something of the same has been evident among Conservative Members as well. It is important that we, as a Parliament, grasp that the issue is not and should not be entirely party political. If possible, we must think through the matter in a somewhat bipartisan manner.

In that respect, the White Paper is a very depressing document for all who believe in checks and balances in the constitution. It does not seek to improve the House of Lords, and pays no more than lip service to bicameralism. If we are to have a bicameral system, we must have two things.

First, the composition of the system must be legitimate enough for it to feel able to exercise its powers. At present, we live in an age of virtual unicameralism, because the House of Lords does not feel capable of exercising the powers that it has. Secondly, a second Chamber must have sufficient powers to enable it to make the House of Commons think again on major legislation.

The White Paper drags its feet on both. Throughout, the subtext is that stage 1 will do. Stage 1 is described as "self-contained" and not dependent on "further reform"—an echo of the wording in the Government's election manifesto.

The White Paper goes further. On page 27, it describes the reform as a "stand-alone" change. There is little commitment to enhancing democratic legitimacy. The underlying theme is one of keeping the Lords a long way from the voters. The White Paper seems to prefer retaining the biggest possible appointed element, implying that, if there must be a democratic element, it should be elected as indirectly as possible.

I believe that such a House of Lords would not have the confidence to take on the House of Commons. Maybe, just maybe, it would, as the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) suggested. To protect itself against the unlikely event of the House of Lords acquiring some legitimacy—by the removal of the hereditary peers and by more quango appointments—the Government have guarded their flank. The White Paper clearly sets out, mostly on pages 40 and 41, their determination to trim the powers of the Lords further in major ways.

[Mr. Andrew Tyrie]

First, there is a clear statement of the Government's intention to put into a more legal form some conventions by which the peers have traditionally operated self-limitation of their powers. The most important of those is the Salisbury doctrine, but no reference is made to the fact that that doctrine was devised as a response to the inbuilt Tory majority that Labour is committed to removing. Once rough parity is achieved between the parties, logic says that the Salisbury doctrine should fall away. To set it in legal form, therefore, would be not to continue as we are, and greatly to circumscribe what the Lords may do. That would gravely weaken the Lords, whatever that House's composition.

The power of delay, too, is crucial. It is not commonly appreciated that the delaying power may already be under threat from the proposal of the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons to enable legislation to be carried over from one Session to another. At present, that proposal will be implemented only with the agreement of both Houses. However, if over time the presumption is established that Bills can normally be carried over, and if that presumption finds its way into Standing Orders, the one-year delaying power of the Lords will have its teeth drawn almost completely.

At present, the Lords can impose an obligation on the Government to move legislation from one session to the next. That power, with all the consequent problems for rearrangement of the next Session that it entails, is the one serious power of the House of Lords. It would go.

Mr. Sheldon: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to say that there is nothing to prevent the Government from introducing further legislation to limit the powers of the House of Lords. However, anyone who assumes that stage 1 and stage 2 will be followed by further legislation on the powers of the House of Lords is assuming that there will be a terrific amount of legislation.

Mr. Tyrie: The right hon. Gentleman seems to imply that the powers of the House of Lords can only be reduced. I am suggesting that that may not be so. It may be sensible to remain in a bicameral world in which there is a balance of power between the two Houses. The House of Commons should have the last word, but the House of Lords might retain substantial powers. I do not see the strength of the right hon. Gentleman's point.

Even if I am wrong, and the Modernisation Committee's proposal does not develop as I have suggested, the Government do not want to take any risks. They do not rely on the Modernisation Committee's proposal alone to weaken the House of Lords. They have made it clear that they are contemplating reducing the delaying power to less than a year in any case. That would draw the teeth of the remaining powers of the House of Lords virtually completely.

I do not know whether Labour Members think that sensible. Do they think that the Lords should be left with no practical delaying power at all?

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): Yes.

Mr. Tyrie: A voice, probably a unicameralist voice, is saying yes, highlighting the divisions on the Labour Benches of which I have already spoken. The White Paper sometimes argues for bicameralism, but it slips occasionally into unicameralism, paying lip service to the mutterings that we can hear from some Labour Members.

Just in case the combination of removing the hereditaries and creating a quango, plus a reduction in the powers of the House of Lords, might lead the royal commission to speak up, suggesting that the Lords' powers should be preserved or even enhanced—which I would favour—the Government have virtually removed the question of powers from the remit of the commission. The last thing that Labour wants is any public debate about Lords' powers. You do not need to take my word for it, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In an interview just the other day, Baroness Jay said that reforming the powers of the Lords

"is not the kind of discussion that is most appropriately held in public."

Lest we be in any doubt about the Government's approach to powers, Baroness Jay made it clear in her answer to Lord Rodgers in the other place on the day of the statement—I went to another place to hear it. Referring to the text of the White Paper, she said of the royal commission's remit:

"we were careful not to open up the rather difficult area of powers".—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 20 January 1999; Vol. 596, c. 591.]

In other words, when it comes to Lords' powers, the royal commission should keep out.

It is becoming clearer now—if it was not before—that Labour never intended to do anything more than abolish the hereditaries. It has been forced away from that course and into establishing a royal commission. However, the Government have no idea what they want in stage 2—in fact, they would rather not have stage 2. If they go any further than stage 1, they will want just a "little Bill" to reduce the powers of the Lords further.

An important choice of fundamental constitutional significance is now facing the House. It is about the balance between the Executive and Parliament. I favour a strong Executive: I do not want checks and balances to lead to immobilism. However, I want an Executive that is subject to thorough scrutiny by Parliament. I believe that, for a country such as ours, bicameralism offers the best chance of delivering that scrutiny.

It would be all too easy to allow Labour's proposals to pass through under the guise of Labour doublespeak about increased democracy. The subtext of this debate is that many Commoners—including some of my hon. Friends—quietly like the idea of weakening the power of the Lords. Some hon. Members are convinced abolitionists and unicameralists, as Labour has been for so much of its history. However, I urge my fellow parliamentarians not to lose sight of the bigger picture. Britain is being governed by an over-mighty Executive and a supine Parliament. I have not met any new Members of Parliament on either side of the House who believe that serious scrutiny of the Government—

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Tyrie: I am sorry, but there are only a few minutes left.

I have not met anyone on either side who thinks that serious scrutiny of the Government is occurring in Standing Committees—still less on the Floor of the House. Secondary legislation floods through on the nod. The Government do not bother to announce anything in the Chamber: it is all done beforehand in the media. They did not even bother to announce the establishment of the royal commission here: that was done via a leak to *The Observer*. Some Ministers do not bother to answer letters for months at a time. I have kept a record of them—although one of the worst miscreants has lost his job. I sometimes get the impression that the Prime Minister can barely contain his disdain for this place: he believes it to be completely irrelevant.

However, I do not want to make an entirely party political point. The power of this place over the Executive has been declining for a long time, with the more than doubling in the payroll vote since the war; with the changes in party structure that have left the Whips dominant and all but wiped out the independent Back Bencher; and, above all, with the development of Standing Orders that give precedence to Government business over all other business.

As parliamentarians, we should have an interest in ensuring that some scrutiny takes place. Even if keeping the Whips happy and the hope of promotion to the Front Bench is a deterrent at times, we owe it to our constituents to make the effort to act as parliamentarians have acted before us. I believe that it would be a terrible mistake for this place to derive too much satisfaction from the emasculation of the other place which this Bill threatens.

As a debating Chamber, we must not try to go it alone. That is pretty much what Labour is proposing under the guise of this White Paper, which uses words such as "modern" and "new". We may be left without a second Chamber worthy of the name whose composition gives it little or no legitimacy and whose powers have been eroded and further eroded. That is why the Bill is so pernicious and why I will vote against it tonight.

9.29 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): We have had a remarkable two days of debate, with 37 speeches from Back Benchers. I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House will forgive me if I decline to give way during my speech: I apologise for that, but the need to refer to many of the speeches made gives me little time for anything else, and the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office and I cut down our time so that as many Back Benchers as possible could speak.

As I listened to the 37 speeches, I thought of the Heinz 57 varieties, for we have heard 37 different accounts of how the second Chamber should be reformed. There have been some magical moments: for me, one of the most magical occurred less than half an hour ago, when the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) announced in an intervention that he was a descendant of Oliver Cromwell—the first hereditary Lord Protector.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), the Father of the House, made an extraordinary, splendid and spirited speech, in which he explained that he had not really been a lord of creation, having created only 48 peers, compared with the 715 created by his successors. Perhaps that explains a great deal. We heard the re-maiden speech of the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), who announced that he had been the father of the royal commission. He made the immortal remark that, because of what had been done to the constitution by the Government's ill-thought-out devolution proposals, we had to find some much-needed glue; and perhaps that could be provided by a reconstituted House of Lords.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), another former Prime Minister, made a fine speech in which he expressed his concern about the fact that 700 years of parliamentary evolution should be dispatched in only a few months under the unrealistically tight timetable given to the royal commission. An interesting aspect of his speech is that it was the speech of a true parliamentarian, as was the magnificent speech made yesterday by the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn). I might not agree with everything the right hon. Gentleman says, but every time he speaks in the House, by Jove, he is worth listening to.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh, South (Mr. Griffiths) saw virtue in simplicity—well, I suppose that is appropriate sometimes. The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) was somewhat dismissive of the House of Lords, but pleasantly eloquent about some of its Members. The hon. and learned Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews) was introduced, in a memorable bon mot, as Mr. Marshall Hall. In a remarkable speech, he suggested that what was needed were bricklayers down the Corridor. Having read my papers, I know that the hon. Gentleman is a great expert on building—no doubt he wants to leave that remarkable underground edifice to someone when he goes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge–Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) made a moving speech—indeed, he always speaks with considerable passion and great conviction. Announcing himself—perhaps slightly improbably—as a disciple of Tom Payne, he declared that it was essential that we should have an effective second Chamber, and that that meant an elected second Chamber. I must apologise to the hon. Member for Basildon (Angela Smith), for hers is the only one of today's speeches that I did not hear. She was enthusiastic in her support for the Bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) made a fine speech, in which he quoted Baroness Jay on the modernisation of Government and pointed out that, in saying that, she gave the game away. The right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), who was an opponent of the previous scheme for Lords reform, explained that that measure was defeated in 14 days—only twice as long as it took the Almighty to create the world. He argued effectively for a longer time span for the royal commission to do its work.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) took us on a Cook's tour of his own lineage. With the inimitable wit that he always brings to his speeches, he contrasted the deliberation that took place on the reform of local government in part of London with the breakneck speech with which the Government propose to force through this constitutional reform.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman) wants the second Chamber to be constituted as a large regional assembly. My hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) is opposed to the hereditary principle, but pointed out, also with

[Sir Patrick Cormack]

considerable eloquence, that the House of Lords works. He wants to be persuaded that whatever replaces it will be effective.

The hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) made an effective speech, but seemed to spend half his time attacking arguments that had not been made by Conservative Members. He was trying to suggest that there had been a passionate defence of the automatic right of hereditary peers to sit in the House of Lords. I have yet to hear that defence made in this debate.

That point certainly was not made by, for example, my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton–Brown), who pointed out that he has received few letters from his constituents about House of Lords reform. I ask any hon. Member present who has received more than 100 letters about that in the past two years to put up his or her hand. I do not think that a single hand will go up. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) raised his hand. By Jove, they talk of little else in Pendle. Most of our constituents—I am sure that yours are no exception, Mr. Deputy Speaker—are interested in schools, hospitals and jobs, and are not moved to write to us to demand House of Lords reform.

The hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) waited a long time to speak and gave a long speech, which she ended with an extraordinary peroration on what she called the "slumbering squirearchy". I have not seen any of them around recently.

The starting point for any discussion about the future of the second Chamber should not be the composition of the Chamber or even its powers, but the type of constitution that we want in the United Kingdom. With all its many imperfections, our system, more than any other on offer, delivers accountability on the part of Government. One identifiable body—the party in government—is responsible for public policy, and electors can hold it to account at the next general election. We have to accept that that core attribute would be challenged if power were fragmented among other bodies. An inevitable consequence of electing more layers of government is what Lord Norton has called the paradox of accountability: the more elected bodies there are, the less accountable each becomes, because electors do not know whom to hold to account.

It can be convincingly argued that, if we are to retain that core attribute of our Westminster system, this Chamber must remain the sole directly elected Chamber. The role of the second Chamber in our present system is to be complementary to this Chamber, not competing and not subservient. The present House of Lords has proved, as the White Paper rather grudgingly admits, a diligent body of scrutiny, revision and debate. Those features surely need to be retained and, if possible, strengthened.

That should be the starting point for any discussion about the future of the House of Lords. The Government are looking down the wrong end of the telescope. The constitution has to be looked at in the round. We have to consider how the different parts relate to one another, and appreciate that simply changing one part without seeing it in the context of the whole damages all the other parts and can thus undermine the whole.

The White Paper is called "Modernising Parliament: Reforming the House of Lords", but it is not about modernising Parliament. Parliament, as an institution, gets only a cursory mention at the beginning. The White Paper has merits as a scene-setting options paper, but nowhere does it explain the Government's constitutional aims. No one, least of all the Government, seems to know what those are. The Bill contains a simple proposition to remove, but there is no suggestion of what should replace what is being removed. We should examine the Bill's effects, and consider what they are likely to be on the working of Parliament.

According to the Government, hereditary peers rarely turn up in the House of Lords, and the House of Lords can do very well without them. The noble Baroness Jay said:

> "The Government have always made it clear that they appreciate the contribution which individual hereditary peers can make to the work of the House of Lords. However, the Government are also clear that much of the work of the House is done by life peers, and that the House will continue to function perfectly well after the hereditary peers have left."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 17 December 1998; Vol. 595, c. *171*.]

Paragraph 27 of the explanatory notes to the Bill states that the financial effects of the Bill "will be negligible". It says:

> "The Bill would reduce the size of the House of Lords, but since many of those who will be removed attend very rarely, there will not be any significant savings on Peers' expenses and daily allowances."

According to the White Paper,

> "Only 40 per cent. of Life Peers attended more than two thirds of the House's sessions and 34 per cent. attended less than one third. The equivalent figures for Hereditary Peers are 20 per cent. and 67 per cent."

Those statements reveal a very odd attitude towards the contribution of hereditary peers. Given the number of hereditary peers, 20 per cent. of them amounts to 150 peers, and 40 per cent. of life peers is approximately 200. In other words, hereditary peers comprise more than 40 per cent. of the frequent attenders. The present House of Lords is effective as a scrutinising and debating Chamber because most life peers, and a fair number of the hereditaries, are experts and have experience in their respective fields. If almost half the very active membership were removed, a notable burden of extra work would have to be carried by life peers.

There is no way round such a problem, other than the Weatherill amendment, which should be put on the face of the Bill immediately. However, the fact remains that the Government have given no sustained thought to the consequences of removing hereditary peers. If they have given no thought to the consequences of stage 1, it is hardly surprising that they have given less to stage 2.

Let us be clear; we are not debating the hereditary principle as such. *[Interruption.]* All those who support a constitutional monarchy accept that. We are debating the practice of allowing hereditary peers to sit in the House of Lords. We, as a party, do not seek to defend that automatic right. For my part, I sought to introduce a private Member's Bill 15 years ago to limit that right and to do away with the built-in majority in the upper House. We are content to accept the Weatherill proposals, but object most strongly to the way in which the Government have lurched from slogan to expedient, motivated by vindictiveness and a wilful refusal to recognise that there are men and women in the House of Lords who have given of their time and talents in the public service.

Having stated their aim to remove such people, the Government should have at that point produced a White Paper and established a royal commission.

We should—and could—have had this debate 18 months ago. The royal commission, without being unduly rushed, could have reported by now. There is a story of Churchill contemptuously dismissing the pudding presented to him at a great banquet by saying,

"Take it away; it has no theme."

The Government's constitutional policy has no theme. Even now, let us try to get things right rather than playing ducks and drakes with the constitution. What we decide over the next couple of years must be able to stand the test of time. So, whatever proposals emerge from the royal commission must be subject to proper and detailed scrutiny.

I shall propose a constructive programme of sensible reform. If the Government accept a Weatherill-type amendment in this place, consider carefully other amendments that we shall table in a constructive spirit, give the royal commission until summer 2000 to report, and allow proper time for consideration of the proposals in both Houses and in the country, there is no reason why we should not be able to agree on a form of second Chamber, which could come into being at the beginning of the next Parliament.

However, if we are to reach the desired conclusion, the Government must take particular care over the appointment of that commission. I urge the Minister to say this evening that the commission will be appointed on the basis of consultation, and that it will include representatives from both sides of this House, nominated by the parties to which they belong.

If we can find that basis of consensus, all is perhaps not lost. At present, this is a rag-bag of a mean little Bill, and I urge my right hon. and hon. Friends to vote against it.

9.45 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): I am delighted that we have been able to discuss the Bill over two days. We have had more than 11 hours of speeches in the debate and a total of 45 speakers, counting those who spoke from the Front Benches. I am sorry that a number of hon. Members who have been present for a large part of the debate have not had the opportunity to participate because of lack of time.

The discussion has been wide ranging, covering the Bill and the underlying White Paper. There will be an opportunity during the Committee stage, which will be taken soon on the Floor of the House, for all hon. Members to pursue in detail issues and points raised in the debate.

The debate has been good-humoured in the main, thoughtful at times, and occasionally passionate. Some criticisms have been made of the fact that no thanks have been given to the Lords for their services over the years. At the risk of offending one or two—only one or two—of my colleagues, I am prepared to put that right now. Many, many Lords have given unstinting time, effort and commitment; I have no hesitation in saying that. I value their service over a long period. That, however, does not justify the system. Those peers are making the best of a bad job.

Many specific points were made during the debate. I am conscious of the fact that I may not be able to answer them all, but I give an undertaking to write to hon. Members before Committee.

There were several important themes to the debate. First, I am struck by the consensus across the House on the need for change. Almost without exception, hon. Members have advocated change. Some have been more radical in their approach. Yesterday, the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) and the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) made interesting suggestions on the composition of the second Chamber. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) spelled out clearly—we heard him—his position on the hereditary peers.

During the debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Mr. Wareing), the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews) advocated the case for a single Chamber. I was interested to hear the Father of the House, the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), speak tonight about the need for an elected Chamber. For him, the time had come for change.

The overwhelming opinion of the House is that the hereditary principle cannot be defended any longer. I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Mr. Hope) for vigorously questioning hon. Members on that point. It reminded me of the accusation, "When did you last see your father?" In this case, the question was, "Do you sign up to clause 1?", which states:

"No-one shall be a member of the House of Lords by virtue of a hereditary peerage."

What is the attitude of those on the Conservative Front Bench on that matter? Do they support the hereditary principle or not? There still seems to be a slight ambiguity. The campaign guide, as we heard, stated:

"It is important to defend the hereditary principle in its own right."

Last night, the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), who leads for the Opposition on this matter, said:

"We have made it perfectly clear that the hereditary principle in itself is not something that we challenge."—[*Official Report*, 1 February 1999; Vol. 324, c. 620.]

The hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin)—his co-defendant, as he had been put on the Front Bench—vacillated, but eventually conceded that

"there is not a chance in hell of the Opposition proposing the resurrection"

of the hereditary peers. Indeed, he continued:

"the Opposition would not dream of proposing the hereditary principle as a way forward."

At the end of the debate, he said quite clearly that the Opposition

"do not oppose clause 1 in principle."—[*Official Report*, 1 February 1999; Vol. 324, c. 654-91.]

The Opposition's position reminds me of the approach that they have taken on all constitutional issues: oppose the Scottish Parliament, oppose the Welsh Assembly and oppose the European Parliamentary Elections Bill. When change is inevitable, however, they sign up and seek electoral advantage. They are sinners who repent, just before the final judgment day.

[Mr. Paddy Tipping]

The importance of the Bill is that it has already triggered an effective change in position by the Opposition, but what has also been an issue—

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Tipping: The hon. Gentleman has honoured us with his presence. Some hon. Members in the Chamber have sat through the debate for 11 hours without being called to speak, but he has just joined us.

The pace and scale of change have also been an issue. It is not clear at all whether the Opposition believe that the pace of change is too fast or too slow. They have criticised us for not setting up the royal commission earlier, and they have criticised us on the other constitutional issues on the agenda and on the big issues: a minimum wage and the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, which took priority in the first Session of this Parliament.

What do the Opposition say about the pace of change? The hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) tries to make a deal extending the life of the royal commission, but the mood—certainly in parts of today's debate—is that we have not moved quickly enough. What did the Opposition do when they were in power? They had an 18-year policy vacuum on constitutional change. They maintained the status quo; they wanted a quiet life. They did not believe in constitutional change; it was a black hole for them.

The former Lord Chancellor, Lord Mackay, has been set up to lead a commission on the Opposition's behalf.

Mr. Evans: The Minister is obviously seeking some form of consensus. Will he allow the Conservative party to appoint its own nominees to the royal commission and the appointments commission?

Mr. Tipping: It is interesting that the Opposition spokesman, having again opposed change, now argues for a step that will give the Opposition some political advantage. That sums up their approach to this matter.

Mr. Evans: Answer my point.

Mr. Tipping: I will come to that point in a moment.

Lord Mackay, a former Lord Chancellor, is setting up a commission, but none of his thinking—and none of his work—has impinged on the debate in the Chamber today. I look forward to the work done by the Opposition being put towards the royal commission.

The royal commission has a demanding timetable. It has an independent chairman, a fact that, on 20 January, was welcomed by the Opposition. Lord Wakeham is currently consulting about the membership of the commission. I hope that we can establish a commission that meets the needs of all parties in this House.

It is simply not true that this issue is being kicked into the long grass. We will be judged on what we achieve, but I believe that the eventual endgame will be quicker than the pessimists forecast. Our aim is to make the position clear before the general election.

I suspect, however, that the Opposition are keen not to kick the issue into the long grass, but to kick it into the jungle and put a palisade around it. That is the traditional device of those who have opposed change over the years. The idea is to ask more and more questions, to make life more difficult, to go for a one-stage solution, to argue for the big bang and, at the end of the day, to delay and delay until nothing is happening.

Mr. Grieve: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Tipping: No.

This time, that simply will not work. This is a short, simple, elegant Bill, which is already acting as a catalyst for change in the thinking of Opposition Members. The debate is moving on, not with a big bang, but in the British tradition of evolutionary change, one step at a time and adapting to survive.

The Opposition made a lot of noise about the need to hold the Executive to account. I am surprised that they cannot see for themselves that that is an implicit criticism of their own performance in the House since the general election. At least the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) recognised that. Rather than discussing a big issue and a broader vision, Opposition Members talk about the trivia—the trips and the accommodation. They are not interested in modernising Britain.

That leads me to the Opposition's wider accusation that the second Chamber will be a quango packed with the Prime Minister's placemen and placewomen. We have been fortunate today in hearing from two former Prime Ministers. The right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup was certainly sparing with his appointments. I thought that was due to principle, until he told us this evening that, for every appointment he made, he disappointed nine other people. The right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) made it clear that he, too, had made appointments—160, of whom 75 were Conservatives, 40 Labour and 17 Liberal Democrats. He packed the upper House with his own people. He argued that the life peers were not independent, but 119 Cross Benchers are life peers—more than 20 per cent. of the total number.

The current Prime Minister has made it clear that he will establish an appointments commission on Nolan lines. He will give up power; he will not block the appointments of other party leaders. What is more, we have said in our White Paper that we will seek broad parity between parties in the other place. No one has concentrated on that. Winding up the debate, the hon. Member for South Staffordshire did not make it clear whether that principle, for which the Tories have stood since 1911, still obtained.

Opening the debate, my right hon. Friend the President of the Council described the Bill as a simple solution, designed to remedy a state that is broken and indefensible. After 88 years of debate on the hereditary element of the House of Lords, the Bill provides an agenda for action. It constitutes another step towards the modernisation of Parliament and Britain. It is time to stop looking at the old—the past—and to fix our sights on the future.

The time has finally come to modernise the House of Lords. We have a chance to make it more representative—a chance to build a new future. After years of indecision and confusion, the Bill provides a way forward. The time has come to face the challenge; the time has come to make the change.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 137, Noes 383.

Division No. 52] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Rt Hon Sir Alastair
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, Rt Hon Sir Edward
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Norman, Archie
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Ruffley, David
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Wardle, Charles
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Wilshire, David
Woodward, Shaun
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Stephen Day and
Mr. Nigel Waterson.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cable, Dr Vincent
Caborn, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dafis, Cynog
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Don *(Bath)*

Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Gorrie, Donald
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton S'W)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Killoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mrs. Anne McGuire and
Mr. David Jamieson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 62 (Amendment on Second or Third Reading):—

The House divided: Ayes 381, Noes 135.

Division No. 53] **[10.13 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie

Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cable, Dr Vincent
Caborn, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dafis, Cynog
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Gorrie, Donald
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra

Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mrs. Anne McGuire and
Mr. David Jamieson.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Rt Hon Sir Alastair
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Norman, Archie
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Ruffley, David
Sayeed, Jonathan
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Wardle, Charles
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Wilshire, David
Woodward, Shaun
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Stephen Day and
Mr. Nigel Waterson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read a Second time.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills),

That the Bill be committed to a Committee of the Whole House.—*[Mr. Tipping.]*

Question agreed to.

Committee tomorrow.

WELSH GRAND COMMITTEE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 108 (Welsh Grand Committee),

That the Welsh Grand Committee shall meet at the County Hall, Aberaeron, on Monday 22nd February at Eleven o'clock to take questions under Standing Order No. 103 (Welsh Grand Committee (questions for oral answer)), and to consider the matter of transport policy in Wales under Standing Order No. 107 (Welsh Grand Committee (matters relating exclusively to Wales)), proceedings being interrupted at Four o'clock—*[Mr. Hanson.]*

Question agreed to.

Libraries

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Hanson.]*

10.26 pm

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): This is, surprisingly, the first Adjournment debate on libraries, according to the Library. That is what we think, at least, and I will claim it until told otherwise. In the light of the *Evening Standard* report last week, claiming that up to 20 public libraries are to close in London alone, it is a timely debate, especially as we are celebrating the national year of reading.

Going to the library is, after visiting the pub, eating out, driving for pleasure and eating at a fast-food chain, the fifth most popular pastime in the United Kingdom. There are four types of library in use in the United Kingdom. There are our six great deposit libraries, led by the British library, which are the envy of the world; the academic libraries in our universities, hospitals and colleges, which are seriously underfunded; school libraries, on which I shall dwell at length shortly; and our public libraries, which are under threat everywhere.

Ms Linda Perham (Ilford, North): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. As he says, it is our first debate on libraries. I want to make a contribution as chair of the new all-party group on libraries and as a professionally qualified librarian. I welcome the Government's declared commitment—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I understand that the hon. Lady wants to contribute to the debate at a later stage. She cannot make a speech within the hon. Gentleman's speech. It will be more appropriate if she makes a short contribution when he has completed his speech.

Mr. Wyatt: There are thousands of libraries, such as the wonderful cricket library at Lord's, the library at the British Film Institute, where I dwelt at length when I was writing my book "Wisecracks from the Movies", and the one at Windsor castle.

Libraries come under two Departments, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Education and Employment. In the joined-up government that we are constantly being told is happening, I look forward to hearing my hon. Friend the Minister's response on what initiatives he has undertaken with my hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards regarding school libraries.

The British library is one of the six legal deposit libraries in the United Kingdom and Ireland, dating back to an Act of 1911. The others are Oxford, Cambridge and the national libraries of Scotland, Wales and Ireland. The Irish national library is in Dublin, but there is no national library of Northern Ireland, which is surely an oversight. Perhaps in the new mood that exists there, the deposit library at Trinity college, Dublin, could open a digital version at Queen's university, Belfast, or simply plug itself into an on-line British library.

The British library needs to be redefined for the 21st century. It needs to be the focus for the whole library system, not only in the United Kingdom but in our embassies and high commissions and, most important, in our British Council offices. It needs a private finance initiative to finance the digital library of the future, so that we can all visit it from the comfort of our homes. It also needs to be the lead player in the national grid for learning and the university for industry. Why are we trying to reinvent the wheel? The British library should be the centre of our library policy, and an all-enveloping technology broad-band hub should be built at St. Pancras that lays the architecture down to link every academic library and, as important, every school and every public library.

As for our school libraries, it is amazing that no regulations exist that lay down how much money schools should spend on library books per student. Nor is there a law that lays down how large a given school library should be. At least, that is the case in England and Wales. In Northern Ireland, the recommendation is that school libraries should have spaces of 40 sq m. How generous! In the United Kingdom, however, there is no ring-fence regulation that says that schools should spend a minimum amount on books. That is absurd.

I have visited 33 of the 44 school libraries in my constituency and most of the schools have no full-time librarians. Worse, two libraries are in corridors and, worse still, some of the books are 20 or 30 years old. Other schools in my constituency, thanks to parent-teacher support, have superb libraries. As libraries go on line, it will be the well-off primary and secondary schools that have suites of 60 computers and ISDN lines. The policy is exclusive, not inclusive, and it is unfair. In the information technology world, we talk of the information rich and the information poor, and some of my schools have been information poor for most of this century.

Figures released recently show that provision for school library services fell in the United Kingdom from £2.17 per pupil in 1994–95 to £1.98 in 1996–97, with more than 30 per cent. of secondary schools no longer having a full or part-time librarian. Ofsted should be charged with providing a report on the state of information-rich and information-poor schools, especially with regard to the libraries, library books, computers, internet costs and online support.

In public libraries, the situation is critical. I shall give a quick overview of what is happening in the United Kingdom today. Barnsley plans to close 23 branch libraries. Surrey is reported to be closing 16 branch libraries and Haringey may close two or three. Kingston upon Thames intends to cut the schools library service. Islington may cut its library service so that only five open at the weekends. However, 10 years ago, more than 200 public libraries opened for 60 hours or more. Today, the number of libraries open for 60 hours a week has declined by 49 per cent. There are none open for 60 hours a week in Wales or Northern Ireland and only 43 in Scotland. The number open for 45 to 60 hours has declined by 19 per cent.

A Sheffield university questionnaire found that 48 per cent. of the local authorities which replied had closed libraries in the past 10 years. Some 74 per cent. had reduced opening hours and 69 per cent. had closed for financial reasons. We should compare those figures with the Government's statement of their intention to build a public library network connecting all 4,000 public, but not school, libraries by 2002. That simply does not add up to a coherent, joined-up strategy for libraries for the

[Mr. Wyatt]

21st century and I await my hon. Friend the Minister's response with much interest. I wish to persuade my hon. Friend the Minister to ensure that public libraries open all day on Saturday and Sunday, so that those children from information-poor homes can have access to books and the internet.

I am passionate about libraries because it was through them that I came to understand the value of literature. Later, I was a publishing director at William Heinemann. As a councillor in Haringey, I sat on the leisure committee and learned what a rip-off the buying procedures for library books were. That issue needs attention. if amazon.com or amazon.co.uk can produce a website with 1 million or 2 million books to buy, why can we not produce the same service off the back of the technology to buy library and school books?

As we face the 21st century, I wish to ask my hon. Friend the Minister a favour. Will he lean on the new opportunities fund officials to pre-select the information-poor areas in our communities to make a pre-emptive strike for the homework club funds and to insist that they are placed in local schools or public libraries?

Finally, I shall quote from Frances Hendrix, who said:

"If the public libraries in the UK do not act as the bridge between the new electronic information world and the language and history of print, then no one will, and we risk losing our culture heritage and education."

10.35 pm

Ms Linda Perham (Ilford, North): I want to make just a brief contribution. As I said in my intervention, I am a professionally qualified librarian and I chair the recently formed all-party group on libraries. I welcome the Government's declared commitment to libraries as the cornerstones of their communities and their aim to deliver better education services and to improve reading and literacy standards. I especially welcome the plans embodied in the document "New Library: The People's Network".

However, like my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt), I am worried about the continuing problems with libraries. Local authorities are reducing book funds and opening hours, and even closing libraries. I join my hon. Friend in urging the Minister to be alert to the anxiety about that among members of the public and of the profession.

10.36 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Alan Howarth): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt) on securing this debate. His commitment to reading, to books and to the part that books can play in the life of our society is well known in the House. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, North (Ms Perham), who spoke from her background of professional knowledge. I welcome very much holding a debate in the House on the extremely important subject of libraries.

The Government attach great importance to libraries. They are valued institutions in their own right, and they contribute to the Government's objectives in many ways. They underpin education by providing essential support for children, students and lifelong learners. They enhance public access to the world's store of knowledge and information. They combat social exclusion by helping to bridge the gap between those who can afford access to information and those who cannot. Increasingly, they have a role to play in the modernisation and delivery of public services.

Above all, our libraries are highly respected and cherished by the public, who use them a great deal. I can think of few other public services to which nearly 60 per cent. of the population subscribe. More than 423 million book issues are made each year in England—nearly nine for every man, woman and child. It is that bond with individual users and communities that represents the sector's major strength, and long may it remain.

Libraries fulfil many roles in delivering economic and social benefits to communities. They are broadly based organisations, delivering a multi-faceted range of services to their members.

The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 requires local authorities in England to provide comprehensive and efficient library services and makes it the duty of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to ensure that they do so.

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Howarth: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will allow me to carry on.

My Department takes that duty very seriously, but the key players in the delivery of public library services, as the legislation makes clear, are the local authorities that are responsible for running them. Decisions about the delivery of the library service on the ground, including decisions about opening hours, are for local authorities to make, rather than for the Government. However, I urge authorities to have proper regard to their statutory responsibilities.

The Government's role is to provide a positive policy framework, within which the service can operate and thrive at the local level. Through the use of annual library plans, we will encourage library authorities to focus attention on various areas of their services, such as current Government initiatives, to ensure that our policy is understood and acted on nationally. We are also, of course, looking to raise standards across the board through the establishment of a new museums, libraries and archives council, and improved arrangements for library service co-ordination and representation at a regional level.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey referred to libraries in schools. He will appreciate that they are not my direct responsibility, but I take a close interest in education matters and I can assure him that I work closely with my colleagues at the Department for Education and Employment. The ministerial teams of that Department and mine are developing a shared agenda, as my hon. Friend would wish us to do. My Department played a role in ensuring that school library services were properly taken account of in the DFEE's "Fair funding" proposals.

Libraries have a major role to play in delivering educational objectives, particularly for life-long learning. They provide ready and free access to the nation's

storehouse of knowledge and information, and they allow people of all ages the opportunity to maximise their educational opportunities. Libraries are particularly effective in providing access to learning for those who may be less comfortable in a more traditional or formal learning setting.

Mr. Russell: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Howarth: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for not doing so, but I have too little time.

Libraries allow learners to set the pace and direction of their own learning. I have referred before to our public libraries as street-corner universities. To ensure that they play a central role in delivering educational services, the Government announced in April 1998 the target of connecting all public libraries to the national grid for learning by 2002 via the public library information technology network.

The development of that IT network is a key Government priority. The new opportunities fund, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend, is providing £20 million for information and communicating technology training of library staff, and £50 million for creating digitised content. Our document, "New Links for the Lottery", published on 27 November 1998 proposes further funding to the network via a new opportunities fund stream to support lifelong learning. We are considering responses to our consultation on those proposals.

My hon. Friend suggested that school libraries were left out of our plans for the network. I assure him that that is not the case. The public libraries network will, as he said, link to the national grid for learning by 2002, producing a network that will link schools—whose libraries will be central—with public libraries and other learning institutions. School librarians will be trained to support the use of the network as part of the new opportunities fund's provision for training teachers and library staff.

My hon. Friend suggested that the British library should be the centre of the network. The British library is a centre of excellence, which provides a specialised service to scholars and information seekers from around the world. That is a vital service, but it is a different service from that envisaged for the public library network. The British library will have a role to play in making available its special collections and national treasures. However, it would not be right to charge it with overseeing the provision of the network.

The Government accept that strategic leadership will be needed to ensure that the libraries sector achieves its full potential for involvement in the learning society, and to direct the creation of the public library network. That is why our recent departmental review proposed the creation of a new body—the museums, libraries and archives council—to provide strategic leadership for the whole sector. Meanwhile, we are strengthening the role of the Library and Information Commission, allowing the British library to focus better on activities more central to its role as the national library. The commission has, as my hon. Friend will know, been instrumental in suggesting how the public library network should be designed and implemented, and it will continue to play the central strategic role that my hon. Friend envisaged for the British library.

My hon. Friend mentioned the British library's digital library project. The British library is continuing to develop plans to achieve a digital capability, and I agree that that will be important in future. The private finance initiative is not the only possible route for that. The British library is exploring alternative solutions since negotiations for a public-private finance project did not produce an acceptable solution.

My hon. Friend mentioned the importance of the legal deposit libraries. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced on 17 December our plans for the way forward on legal deposits in the light of our consideration of the report of the independent working group chaired by Sir Anthony Kenny. A copy of that report has been placed in the Library.

Because of concerns about the absence from our national published archive of non-print publications, which are continuing to increase in number and importance, my right hon. Friend has commissioned a detailed voluntary code of practice for the deposit of electronic publications. However, we have accepted the report's conclusion that a statutory system will be needed in the longer term. As my right hon. Friend announced, we intend to move towards legislation on the basis of a minimum burden on publishers once some necessary additional work on definitions and regulatory impact has been carried out.

My hon. Friend mentioned the lack of a legal deposit library in Northern Ireland and asked about a digital version. My right hon. Friend concluded in January 1998, as a result of responses to the 1997 consultation on legal deposit, that there was almost no support for a new deposit library in Northern Ireland. Therefore, he specifically asked Sir Anthony Kenny's working group to examine the scope for improved access in Northern Ireland to deposited material through IT networking. The report's conclusion was that, if an acceptable method of networking deposited electronic material could be agreed, an access point should be located in Northern Ireland. My right hon. Friend has therefore asked Sir Anthony Kenny to examine the scope for the voluntary code to include a basis for the secure networking of CD-ROMs between the deposit libraries in a way that will satisfy copyright holders.

Important first steps towards the library network and an enhanced role for libraries in providing learning opportunities are already being taken. Libraries are extending the educational services that they offer and developing their appeal to those whose educational opportunities may otherwise be limited. Some 200 library learning centres have already been developed, offering services such as information on training and educational opportunities, including careers guidance; provision of basic skills training; courses aimed at women returners; NVQ training for those wanting to enhance skills; and business skills training aimed at small businesses.

Many open learning centres have well-established links with local colleges and are able to support distance learning. Most have a wide range of informing and communicating technology—ICT—equipment and software, with staff trained to support open learning. In addition, libraries are also offering after-school clubs, homework centres, IT resource centres, local history websites, specialised facilities for disabled library users, and outreach to housebound users via the mobile library service and laptop PCs is also being offered.

[Mr. Howarth]

Libraries are also well placed to play a key role in another of the Government's initiatives to create a learning society in Britain: the university for industry. They are among the organisations taking part in pilot projects for the UFI through the European Adapt funding scheme. The traditional strengths of the library service in promoting reading and literacy have not been neglected, with many libraries participating in imaginative ways in the national year of reading.

Mr. Bob Russell: In the light of those wonderful pronouncements, will the Minister explain to the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt), who introduced the debate, why there is a catalogue of library closures, reduced opening hours and so on? Perhaps he would also care to comment on the absence from this debate of any representatives of Her Majesty's official Opposition.

Mr. Howarth: To an extent, it is the season of rumours and alarmism. It is a period when local authorities are setting their budgets and there is anxiety about their capacity to sustain library services of the desired extent and quality. Those matters are clearly under active consideration in a number of libraries. I counsel the hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell) not to rush to conclude that the rumours that we have heard are necessarily true or will prove to be well founded. We have provided a much better public expenditure settlement for local government than in previous years, and we can see no justification whatever for cutting library services in the present financial climate.

As I reminded the House, the 1964 Act places a statutory obligation on local authorities to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State requires library authorities to produce annual library plans and we take that responsibility seriously. We shall closely examine what happens: where cuts are rumoured, my officials will inquire of the library authorities concerned what precisely is going on and we shall not be easily satisfied. We shall rigorously require local authorities to justify alterations in strategy that appear to involve reductions in services.

We recognise that there might be cases of library authorities finding it necessary to rationalise and restructure their services, because we look to them to provide a cost-effective service, which means that the pattern of library services cannot be frozen. Nevertheless, the statutory duty on local authorities remains and we attach great importance to it. I know that local authorities overwhelmingly want to honour their obligation to provide proper library services. I assure the hon. Gentleman that that is also our desire and that we shall act in that respect with great energy, thoroughness and care. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for following my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey in drawing attention to the anxieties that have been expressed. We have all seen the press stories, but I counsel hon. Members not to rush to premature judgment or premature pessimism.

Public libraries play a crucial role in promoting educational achievement, enhancing public access to knowledge and information, combating social exclusion and modernising the delivery of Government and local authority services. The Government have already committed an additional £80 million to develop library services. We are also considering the possibility of further funding through the lottery to encourage the development of computer technology in libraries. I trust that local authorities will remember that more than 60 per cent. of the adult population are members of public libraries and that libraries are among the most popular, widely used and valued local authority resources.

One of my roles is to ensure that local authorities continue to meet their statutory obligation to provide a comprehensive and efficient service and I shall continue to pursue that role vigorously. The Government's requirement on local authorities to prepare library plans is a key part of the process. However, I hope that most authorities will have the vision to provide and develop services and that they will want to go beyond the legal minimum in doing so.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at eight minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 3 February 1999

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Genetically Modified Food

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

9.33 am

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): I feel as if I have hit the jackpot because there are so many hon. Members here on a Wednesday morning. I welcome their attendance, which supports the call made in business questions last Thursday for a debate on genetically modified food. I am delighted to have an opportunity to discuss the issue.

Food is of fundamental importance to us all. It is obvious that public concern about food standards is extremely high. As well as opinion survey evidence, we can see for ourselves that our local supermarkets are stocking more organic produce—food produced by farmers working without chemicals. The organic food market's annual growth rate is estimated to be about 40 per cent. That growth is happening despite the premium that customers must pay to eat those foods, and demonstrates people's desire to eat healthy, nutritious food.

That concern is entirely understandable. Fifty years ago, many people grew food themselves on allotments or in gardens, and I have to declare an interest in that my family has an allotment. Farms at that time seemed more understandable and less mechanised. Many people worked casually in fruit and vegetable picking. Only the other week, when we had a debate about school terms, we were reminded of how the school terms were organised around the need for people to go and pick fruit and vegetables. We seemed closer to our food then and felt that we understood where it came from. Now, food production seems much more distant.

More than ever, we rely on big business to provide our food. It travels great distances, comes from huge mechanised farms and is sold by huge supermarkets, so people do not know exactly what has gone into it. Antibiotics, pesticides, herbicides and other chemicals are all used in growing food. People's uncertainty about how our food is grown and produced is driving the growth in the market for organic produce. I strongly believe that the Government have a role in making sure that all the necessary safeguards are in place.

Now, with technology moving on, the building blocks of food itself are being altered through genetic engineering of crops. People are concerned about that. A MORI opinion poll taken last June found that 61 per cent. do not want to eat genetically modified food. They want healthy food, produced in an environmentally sensible and sensitive manner. It is those concerns that I am so grateful to have an opportunity to raise today. I owe it to my constituents to do so.

I bring to the attention of the House a letter that I received the week before last from a constituent from Middleport. She writes:

> "I just want to say that we as a family do not want genetically altered food, and I don't know many who do. Perhaps you could pass this message on".

My message to my constituent is that I am passing on her words to Parliament. I do not apologise for doing so because this is the one place where GM food needs to be discussed.

I want the Government to respond to the concerns of my constituents and those who participated in one of the first citizens' jury panels organised by Dr. Tom Wakeford. I am pleased to see here my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell), who last week chaired a meeting of the parliamentary environment group on the subject.

The time is right for this debate. The report of the inquiry of the House of Lords European Communities Committee into EC regulation of genetic modification has just been published and awaits the Government's response. The Cabinet enforcer has just announced the joint review of the framework for overseeing developments in biotechnology. There is still time for late submissions to the public consultation. We are also in the throes of setting up a Food Standards Agency. As a vice-president of the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, I am delighted that the Government are making that move and I want this debate to take place in good time for it.

The reform of the common agricultural policy is likely to be agreed in mid-March, setting the future direction of EU agriculture. In February, Environment Ministers from 170 countries will meet in Colombia to sign the biosafety protocol. In researching and raising this issue, however, I have the sense that time is running out and that this is an 11th-hour attempt. I also have a sense of deja vu because I tabled an early-day motion in January 1997—two years ago—which set out my concerns.

Since then, much has happened that is regrettable and makes informed public debate much more difficult. For example, since GM soya beans were mixed with non-GM soya beans in America—Monsanto has persisted in its view that segregation is impractical—it has become impossible for consumers of many processed foods to know whether those foods contain GM soya. Some 60 per cent. of processed foods use soya. The vast majority of us have, therefore, already been exposed to those beans, whether we like it or not.

Many share my concerns. Sainsburys, for example, in evidence to the House of Lords, made a point of saying that it had tried unsuccessfully to persuade Monsanto and the American Soya Bean Association of the need to segregate genetically modified soya from the standard crop for reasons of consumer choice. This is a timely debate. Things can be done, but there needs to be an urgency about them.

Mr. Cynog Dafis (Ceredigion): The issue of segregation is very important. I know that farmers in my constituency feel increasingly obliged to ensure traceability, which imposes considerable additional cost

[Mr. Cynog Dafis]

on them. They accept, however, that that is necessary for consumer confidence. Should not traceability apply particularly to genetically modified organisms?

Ms Walley: I could not agree more. The hon. Gentleman has exposed the myth that genetically modified food is somehow in all our interests because it is cheaper.

My first request of the Government is for the Minister to give careful consideration to announcing a moratorium on the planting of GM crops. That has been requested by a wide range of groups, from the Government's official advisers on wildlife, to the wholefood trade, environmental groups, consumer groups and organic farmers. The reasons for such a request are numerous.

Despite reassurances that the products are rigorously tested and safe, unexpected incidents of illness have, apparently, been caused by such products. In the worst case, I understand that a United States epidemic of eosinophilia myalgia syndrome—EMS—affected about 5,000 people. An estimated 37 died and 1,500 were left permanently disabled with sickness.

I understand that the outbreak was traced to a batch of food supplements produced by genetically engineered bacteria. Dr. Michael Antoniou, senior lecturer and head of a research group at one of London's leading research hospitals, pointed out that that illustrates the difficulty that,

"Even in simple cases such as bacteria, where genetic modification can be carried out with some precision, unpredictable disturbances in bio-chemical functioning with disastrous outcomes can occur."

He comments that it is

"not surprising . . . that unexpected toxins and ill effects have been documented in more complex genetically modified organisms such as plants."

There are questions, too, about the testing of GM products. I have been sent a series of letters on the testing of GM soya, which raises concerns. In one, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food officials confirmed that animal feeding studies were carried out when testing the safety of GM soya beans. In a subsequent letter, the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes confirmed that the feeding tests

"were considered in the context of the evaluation and safety of human food use of the soya. They were indeed relevant".

However, in the final letter, the Minister, who I am pleased is present, told us that

"the information from feeding studies is . . . not considered . . . to be of much value to novel food assessments."

If information from such tests is really of little value, it is surely a matter of concern that it was a relevant part of the testing procedure. I hope that the Minister can expand on that point in his reply.

As well as the safety issue, we must consider the environmental impact of the products. I am delighted to bring to the House's attention the fact that the Environmental Audit Committee, on which I sit—I am pleased to see other members of it present—has decided to inquire into and report on the issue.

Farms cannot be isolated; cross-pollination inevitably occurs. I attended a meeting only last week at which fear was expressed to me, especially on behalf of beekeepers, who are concerned about cross-pollination. It could result in weeds inheriting resistance to weedkiller, raising the spectre of so-called superweeds. Other effects, such as plants generating their own insecticide, could lead to insects developing immunity to the toxins.

The impact of GMOs on wildlife is of great concern to organisations such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, whose views I value. Along with other organisations, it suggested that the Advisory Committee on Releases into the Environment—ACRE—does not have a broad enough membership. ACRE's chairman, Professor John Beringer, suggested in oral evidence to the Lords inquiry that there are holes in the regulatory system, whereby no Government advisory committee is currently looking into the impact of agricultural practice on wildlife population. All such issues deserve the House's urgent scrutiny.

Furthermore, there are fears that the introduction of plants that are resistant to specific weedkillers will lead to farmers using more such weedkillers on their fields. Given that the Government's wildlife adviser, English Nature, is linking the major decline in farm wildlife with intensive farming, that cannot be a sensible way to go. Indeed, English Nature is so concerned that it has issued a statement declaring its support for a moratorium on the commercial releases of GM crops. Its GM adviser, Dr. Brian Johnson, said:

"There is plenty of evidence that our farmland wildlife has suffered a major decline in recent years. The environmentally untested introduction of GMOs could be the final blow for such species as the skylark, corn bunting and the linnet, as the seeds and insects on which they feed disappear."

I very much welcome the work that the Government, especially the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, have done on indicators. We could be undermining all that brilliant work.

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): Does my hon. Friend agree that the birds that she has delimited have declined in numbers anyway due to pesticides, insecticides and other chemicals in the environment? Indeed, the DETR takes account of the number of skylarks and other such factors in setting parameters for the assessment of the assuaging of the environment.

Ms Walley: My hon. Friend is right to say that there has been a decline in all kinds of wild bird species, which is of concern. I am also aware, however, that companies such as Monsanto have been blaming some of that decline on farm cats. We must consider the production of food and its effect.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): Will my hon. Friend clarify whether she is calling for a moratorium on the planting of all genetically modified crops, or just one on the commercial planting of GM crops? There is a difference.

Ms Walley: There is certainly a difference. I am calling for a moratorium on commercially grown crops, which may be a practical first step, but I would not rule out support for a general moratorium. We must assess how we can make progress in stages—and certainly quickly.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): However well intentioned the Government are, there is great frustration

at the fact that a steamroller, which seems to be centred in American business, through the World Trade Organisation, is stopping us as a nation, and even through the European Union, withstanding genetically modified crops or growth hormones in beef, for example. Such things are being forced on us, and there seems to be little that we can do about it.

Ms Walley: My hon. Friend has put his finger on the exact pressure point. The great steamroller of the World Trade Organisation is telling us, and the European Union that, in the interests of world trade, we cannot develop policies based on the precautionary approach that I would want. There is a fundamental issue about whether democratic Governments such as ours can determine the way forward on food production, or whether we must follow multinational companies. Huge issues are at stake. I am pleased to bring to the House's attention the recent work of the Environmental Audit Committee, which is about to be published, in respect of multinational agreements on investment. I note with great interest recent calls by Sir Crispin Tickell for an environmental body that equals in strength the World Trade Organisation.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): I agree with everything that the hon. Lady has said. In view of the problem, would not it be a good idea for every food item on the shelf to carry a warning in a big black box, just like on a cigarette packet, "This food contains genetically modified organisms"?

Ms Walley: I shall come to the issue of labelling later, but that is one proposal which could be considered.

I want to pre-empt a point that the Minister may raise. In October 1998, it was announced that a moratorium of sorts had been agreed, in that no

"insect resistant crops will be introduced into the UK for the next three years."

That announcement was made before the Lords Select Committee by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment, and led to headlines proclaiming, "Genetic crops banned".

As the Minister must surely be aware, no such crops would have been introduced during those three years anyway. Making such an announcement is like promising that the sun will not rise in the middle of the night. The only insect-resistant crop that might be ready for planting in that time scale is a maize made resistant to the European corn borer—and that would not be grown in Britain anyway. The Government should not try to confuse the issue with false proclamations of action. The issue is serious, and should not be obscured by "spin" in such statements.

As questions remain unanswered about the safety of GM crops in terms of their effect on human health, the testing regime that they are subjected to, their effects on wildlife and the wider environment, and the wider effects of the changes in agricultural practices that the use of GM crops will inevitably lead to, I am persuaded of the case for a moratorium; I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister is, too.

Mr. Lawrence Cunliffe (Leigh): I fully support and welcome the moratorium. There is also a call at present—especially in the Council of Europe, where three Committees are considering the issue—for a five-year freeze on genetically manufactured food and all its implications. That call is being made with reference to some 41 countries, which want further research on the subject. Would it not be wise, because of the wide implications of this technology, to support the moratorium with, technically, a five-year freeze? My hon. Friend knows that such a campaign will be launched; will she support such a policy?

Ms Walley: I certainly would. I am glad that my hon. Friend has raised the issue on behalf of the Council of Europe, because there has been concern in Europe generally about the decision by countries such as Austria and Luxembourg to take action against genetically modified crops, despite the fact that such action is illegal in the eyes of the European Commission. I believe that we should accept that the precautionary principle is central to everything that we do in this area. We now need to find ways of moving on. I hope that the Council of Europe will be an important partner in that debate, which involves the European Commission.

I want to impress on the Government the crucial importance of labelling and segregation schemes, which allow consumers to choose whether they eat genetically modified foods. However much people may differ on the rights or wrongs, or the risks and benefits of GM food, there is no question in my mind but that people should be entitled to choose for themselves. Surely we all have a right not to eat GM food.

I believe that support is solid throughout Europe. A Euro Barometer poll, carried out by DG XII last year, found that 82 per cent. of respondents in the United Kingdom wanted labelling. In other countries, it was the same story. In Denmark, the equivalent figure was 85 per cent.; in Germany, 72 per cent.; in Sweden, 81 per cent.; in France, 78 per cent. In case anyone thinks that I am picking the high numbers, the lowest score—for Ireland—was a 61 per cent. majority in favour of labelling.

Even Monsanto, manufacturer of many of these products and the firm that recently spent £1 million trying to convince the British public about them, headed one advertisement:

"Food labelling. It has Monsanto's full backing".

The advertisement continued:

"We believe you should be aware of all the facts before making a purchase."

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): Does the hon. Lady agree that labelling, although terribly important, will be useless unless we can guarantee diversity of supply, and guarantee suppliers of food that their purchases are not genetically modified?

Ms Walley: I am grateful for that intervention; I shall come to that subject shortly. That point was made in a presentation that I attended 10 days ago. Producers that are now sourcing non-GM maize and soya from Brazil are in a real dilemma, because we are a very short planting season away from the time when those non-GMO supplies in Brazil will become GM supplies. There is a real feeling of urgency about that. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that labelling must be backed up by GM-free sources, as well as traceability and proper monitoring of that at all times.

[Ms Walley]

I return to the subject of Monsanto, about which I sound a word of warning. Despite the fact that Monsanto has issued statements such as the one from which I quoted—with which I wholeheartedly agree—it was that company, I understand, which brought a court case in Vermont, USA to prevent the passing of a state law requiring the labelling of products made using one of its genetically modified products, recombinant bovine growth hormone, which is used on milk-producing cows. Monsanto invoked the US constitution to argue that it did not need to disclose that information, and won. So much for believing people that should be made aware of all the facts before making a purchase! To my mind, this country's freedom of information Bill cannot come soon enough.

The moral is clear: we cannot rely on Monsanto to take these decisions for us. It must be for the Government to ensure that foods made using genetically modified ingredients are labelled as such. The Government must ensure that there is a truly free market in which consumers can choose between GM and non-GM food.

Labelling regulation must be well designed, too. Current EC labelling regulations apply to just two genetically modified foods—maize and soya. Even with those two foods, the requirement is that

"genetically engineered protein or DNA"

is detectable. That definition excludes products containing oils, lecithin and other additives made from GM crops, as the DNA is not detectable in those products after the original foodstuffs have been processed. Products made with GM tomatoes, rennet or growth hormones also need not be labelled. That cannot be right. Foods in whose development GMOs have played any part—as a major or minor ingredient—must be labelled as such. So-called "identity preservation" schemes must be used to guarantee that GM-free foods are really GM-free. That is only fair to consumers who, as Monsanto says, should be aware of all the facts before they buy.

The rules must also be policed. Even the current limited and inadequate rules are not being upheld. Last week, trading standards officers in Worcestershire found that five of 24 samples contained GM soya or maize, despite the fact that only one item was labelled as such. That is unacceptable. The current laws must be enforced. In addition, we must consider the fact that the new EC directive does not apply retrospectively, and does not apply to food sources that were on the market before it was introduced.

I congratulate Bob and Carol Stevens, public analysts in Worcestershire, on the work that they have done to develop a technique for detecting genetically modified foods. Worcestershire's report is also to be congratulated. It exposes so well the fact that, although we have strict labelling laws, when it comes to GM food, we do not have truthful—I emphasise that word—labelling of foods. Consumers should be told. I hope that, in his reply, the Minister will take on board the recommendations of the director of environmental services in Worcester that he implements the provision of EU Regulation 1139/98 as soon as possible.

The Government must remember their duty to our wholefood industry, too. The Department of Trade and Industry should consider how it might protect that industry when it faces the threat of its GM-free sources all but drying up, as more countries fail to segregate their GM and GM-free products, especially soya. I know that other countries' policies are matters for them, but I want at least to hear that the Government are actively involved in diplomacy and pressure abroad to protect supplies for an important sector of British industry. That is crucial.

Through highly resourceful sourcing work, the wholefood industry has so far managed to switch its source of soya from the United States, which stopped segregating, to Brazil. That guaranteed a steady supply for the industry's products and enabled it to continue to provide the GM-free produce that its customers wanted. However, Monsanto has opened a major plant in Brazil, and GM soya will shortly be planted by Brazilian farmers. There are fears in the wholefood industry that those crops will not be segregated.

If that happens, sourcing non-GM soya could become extremely difficult. The industry would be in a difficult situation, faced with customers who want GM-free products, but no ready source from which to obtain them. We could be as close as one crop-planting season away from such a changeover. I hope that the Department of Trade and Industry will take the matter seriously and work to protect our wholefood industry.

What pressure can be brought to bear to dissuade Brazil from going down that route? Having read a report, apparently by Stan Greenburg, on the significance attached by Monsanto to persuading the political elites in the United Kingdom to accept GM food, and having read a similar assessment entitled "The Grim German Mood: Biotechnology and Monsanto", I wonder what weight the new German Government will give to the issue when they take over the European Union presidency.

One political elite that seems to have swallowed Monsanto's propaganda is the House of Lords Select Committee, which published a report two weeks ago on GM regulations in Europe. Much was made of its endorsement of the technology, but I urge the Government to tread carefully, as the report contains some alarming discrepancies. I am not saying that the report was not carefully prepared, but we must examine its recommendations cautiously.

The most glaring concern is that the Lords consider that genetic modification "offers great potential benefits", although they accept that the risks are difficult to estimate. That begs the question of how the Lords weighed up the risks and benefits, while admitting that they cannot quantify one half of that equation. I am still to be convinced about who will really benefit from GM food.

Their lordships' approach to the precautionary principle is deeply worrying. They appear to explain that important principle in paragraph 41 of the report, discuss it a little further in paragraph 42 and do away with it entirely by paragraph 43, arguing for a step-by-step approach. I am conscious of our obligations under the Rio convention, and I want us to adopt the precautionary approach.

On segregation and labelling too, the report is confused. It states that

"the use of GM products . . . is an ethical issue",

but goes on to support a system of labelling that would deny consumers the chance to make that ethical decision, by keeping them in the dark about whether foods contain GM produce.

The Lords have been ridiculed for claiming that genetically modified organisms have much to offer organic farming, yet it has been pointed out that organic farming does not allow any genetic modification at all. English Nature, the Government's official wildlife adviser, released a blistering attack on the report's failure to recognise the effect of GM crops on the UK's wildlife. In a new release, English Nature states that the Lords

"failed to understand the implications for farmland wildlife of growing genetically modified crops . . . they say that these crops may benefit wildlife but there is no scientific evidence . . . to back this up."

English Nature went on to say that

"the Committee has completely failed to grasp the point that applying broad spectrum herbicides to herbicide tolerant crops"

will put

"yet more pressure on our wildlife."

Those are all important complaints. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will accept that there are serious flaws in the Committee report. It fails to alleviate any of the concerns that I have raised and leads me back to my starting point—a call for a moratorium on GM crops in this country, and effective segregation and labelling of all GM foods.

I thank the Minister for listening to my concerns. There is little doubt that he and my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment, the DETR Minister most concerned with the impact of GMOs on the countryside, could well be the two Ministers who decide whether there is to be a large-scale release of GMOs into the British countryside—a release that we could never call back.

Why risk that nightmare approach? Why risk too much for a technology as yet unproven? It seems that companies such as Monsanto have to take risks on acquisitions of companies that are currently making low profits, but which have high share prices because of the potential in genetic engineering. If it is true that Monsanto is paying $2.3 billion for 60 per cent. of DeKalb Genetics, even though the company made only $29 million profit in 1997 and $28 million in the first nine months of 1998, perhaps it is more vulnerable than its image in the UK might suggest.

I urge my right hon. and hon. Friends at MAFF, the DETR and the DTI to balance all the interests—the interests of companies such as Iceland, which has kept faith by offering consumers real choice and whose technical director is at present advising consumer groups in Australia; ethical independent wholesalers that genuinely offer quality labelling to strict vegetarian or Soil Association labelling standards; the Restaurateurs Association, which is concerned about the practical implications of labelling GMOs in restaurants, and about the verification of the accuracy of wholesalers' food labelling.

I hope that the debate today will strike a chord with people who care about these matters. The genie is not out of the bottle yet; we just about have time. I urge my hon. Friend, through the Green Ministers group and the Ministerial Committee on the Environment, to work with his colleagues at the DETR, the DTI and the Department of Health, and to work in Europe and at the World Trade Organisation to develop policies that will implement the precautionary principle to guarantee food safety, food quality and environmental sustainability. I hope to report back to my constituent in Middleport that I have passed on her message.

10.7 am

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): We have heard a moving and powerful address from the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley). I pay tribute to her for her good fortune in catching the Speaker's eye and initiating the debate. Because she has been so thorough, she has taken more time than she might have wished. Many Conservative Members support her general approach.

I have a particular interest in the matter. The hon. Lady may remember that I had the good fortune last July to have the last Adjournment debate before the summer recess. That debate was on the same subject. I pay tribute to the Minister for being in his place then and now to deal with such a complex subject.

My constituency includes the test areas where there was a tremendous fracas last year, when protesters, wrongly, tore up the crop and criminal prosecutions resulted. That shows the strength of feeling among many hundreds, if not thousands, of my constituents in the Dartington-Totnes area about those experiments.

There is no doubt that the United Kingdom leads the world in genetic engineering. Provided that such research is carried out carefully, we have nothing to fear. The trouble is that GM crop experiments seem to have gone ahead with enormous pace. The speed of developments, rather than the technology itself, worries the public.

Through GM crops we could create foods with a delayed spoilage time. We could, for example, grow corn in the Sahara and feed millions more people. There is an altruistic vision, not only dangers, associated with GM crops. Although there are understandable fears about the consequences if the technology develops too fast, it could be tremendously important for food production throughout the world and for feeding the hungry.

I agree with the hon. Lady that certain conclusions reached by the Lords Select Committee were incorrect, but I do not believe that they were the result of the Committee being over-lobbied by Monsanto. The Lords Committee believes that the benefits of GM crops outweigh the risks. That might be true in developing countries where harsh terrain makes it difficult to grow crops. However, in Europe, we already produce far more food than we can eat. Mountains of food paid for by the taxpayer are destroyed. It makes no sense to create more food, for which the taxpayer will pay more, that will subsequently be disposed of. I cannot see the logic of creating more food in Europe when we cannot eat what we produce already.

The Lords Committee said that a product need not be labelled if it contained below an established threshold of GM material. That is an invitation for manufacturers to buck the system. Those consumers who wish to eat non-genetically modified food will find themselves consuming products that contain traces of genetically modified material. What about the build-up of such material in the body over time if unlabelled genetically modified foods are eaten regularly? For that reason, I suggest that genetically modified food products should carry a warning similar to that found on cigarette cartons, advising the public that that food item contains genetically modified material.

Last week, I saw a sign displayed prominently in Sainsburys in Victoria street—I hope that I did not misread it—stating that the salmon on sale had been fed

[Mr. Anthony Steen]

with genetically modified material. It was interesting to note that the product appeared hardly touched. I believe that the marketplace will respond to such warnings.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): Did my hon. Friend observe that the House of Lords Committee examined the question whether intact transgenes could be absorbed by human DNA through food and reached the conclusion that those fears were unfounded? Therefore, does my hon. Friend accept that it is more important to look at the characteristics of the product and the impact that they might have on human health rather than concentrating on the technological process by which a food is developed?

Mr. Steen: As always, my hon. Friend raises a very challenging and interesting point. He might recollect that, for nearly a decade, successive Governments suggested that there was no danger associated with organic phosphorus sheep dip. It was believed that it could not possibly affect human beings. However, they have now discovered evidence to the contrary. At present, there is a scare involving Scottish salmon, which it is feared have a blood disease. It is believed that there is no chance of passing the disease to human beings, but how do we know what the effects will be in 10 or 15 years?

Mr. Lansley *rose—*

Mr. Steen: I will not give way again—not because I do not want to, but because it is unfair to other hon. Members. Furthermore, I probably cannot answer my hon. Friend's question.

The House is concerned about the drip, drip, drip effect of genetically modified crops creeping into the food chain without people being aware of it, without proper warnings and without the correct tests. We want the Minister to confirm today that the public of this country will not be forced, without their knowledge, to eat genetically modified food. We must not find that, in 20 or 25 years, there is a new disease that could have been prevented and that the Government must answer any cases of negligence that arise. Future generations must not be at risk, mentally or physically. We do not know the answers to many questions, but we should not move forward on the basis of company profits that could affect the health of the nation. We do not know what effects genetically modified crops might have, so we must be cautious rather than sorry.

10.14 am

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): This is my first contribution to a debate on genetically modified food, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley) on providing that opportunity. I have a long-standing interest in such matters: I studied plant pathology at Imperial college and did postgraduate research into genetics. I understand scientists' excitement about new discoveries and I support continued scientific endeavour. There is absolutely no doubt that the pursuit of science has made an enormous contribution to human life.

Every major scientific development—from the steam engine to the heart transplant—has involved both risks and benefits. Theoretically, genetic engineering is no different: there are bound to be risks, but surely there must also be benefits. When the benefit is to human health, most people are prepared to take substantial risks. However, as my hon. Friend said, when it comes to genetically modified foods, public attitudes are hostile, with more than 70 per cent. of people opposed to the idea.

It is easy to assume that, perhaps, that opposition is caused by ignorance. The companies that promote such foods argue that if people understood the issues better, they would happily accept them. Perhaps the hostility comes from recent—although, for most of us, not direct—experience. We all know about listeria, salmonella and bovine spongiform encephalopathy. However, I believe that public concern arises from an innate sense that food is not just another commodity; it is the very sustenance of life. That is neither an ignorant nor a primitive belief—indeed, I believe that it is entirely rational.

Why, when the organic food market is growing more quickly than telecommunications or computer science, should we be forced to consume genetically modified foods? Are they good for us? The manufacturers' proudest boast is that there is no intrinsic difference; that we cannot tell the difference between GM and other foods. Therefore, I suggest that there is no intrinsic nutritional value in such food. Are genetically modified foods bad for us? Frankly, we do not have a clue. What is the justification for producing such food? We have heard some mention this morning, by way of intervention, of the likely benefits. They include higher crop yields, greater resistance to disease and the potential for good in the developing world.

I shall refer to the last point. Who, in this rich and well-fed country, would seek to deny better food supplies to those in the developing world? However, I do not believe for a minute that people in Africa are starving because of a lack of genetically modified foods. People in Africa are starving because of civil wars, all kinds of social and economic disruption and because of the failure of food distribution mechanisms. Those are the causes of starvation in Africa, not novel foods or the lack of them.

There are many things that we can do. Over the years, through cross-breeding and known and proven scientific techniques, we have developed better potential crops and better seed supplies. We can continue to do a whole host of things to assist the developing world. Achievements in terms of better yields and other developments can be attained by combining age-old cross-breeding techniques—which man and nature have used throughout the centuries—with sensible applications of agrochemicals in certain circumstances. But if big business argues that we need to develop genetically modified crops commercially for the sake of competitiveness and if the consumers want a mass market of cheap food, does it really matter? I believe that it does, because if genetically modified crops are grown commercially it will be impossible to isolate them from the wider, surrounding environment. It matters fundamentally, because there is no equivalence between genetically engineered crops and those that have been cross-bred by man and nature over the centuries.

The process of transferring genes from one species to another does not occur in nature, which is why genetic engineering is unpredictable, uncontrollable and, in my view, totally unnecessary. As Greenpeace has argued, no one knows what the long-term effects of eating genetically engineered food—day after day, year after

year—will be. Genes that have never been part of the human diet are in GM crops and foods, including genes from viruses and bacteria from those organisms. They may prove to be a severe risk to human health. Furthermore, they can, and probably would, change our environment irreversibly.

Genetically engineered organisms and plants are living things, so they can multiply and breed in the natural environment. They will go on breeding for generations to come. Herbicide-resistant genes that are transferred into crops, and which seem to be positive and advantageous, could also produce superweeds or superbugs if they spread.

Dr. Lynne Jones: A moment ago, my hon. Friend said that there was no evidence that genes transferred from one species to another. Now she says that there is a danger that genetically modified DNA—deoxyribonucleic acid—could be transferred from one species to the other. There appears to be some inconsistency there.

Joan Ruddock: Not at all. If genetic engineering occurs, the crop or the plant has a new genome and the potential for that crop or plant to cross-breed with another plant is present. The genetic engineering would have introduced the different DNA from the different species. Then there could be interbreeding between the same species.

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): Does my hon. Friend accept that there is considerable evidence about such transfers? Yesterday I read about research done in Denmark on transfers of herbicide resistance in oil seed rape into adjacent fields, of both crops and weeds. The fact that that is already happening strengthens her cautionary argument considerably.

Joan Ruddock: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who makes a very significant point.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North warned of the alarming discrepancies in the House of Lords report. I add two more references to those cited by my hon. Friend. Most frightening is the assumption that safety can be established. Although I agree that labelling is absolutely vital, I cannot accept paragraph 187 on page 49 of the report, which says:

"Once the regulatory process has ensured safety, the success or failure of the technology must be left to consumer choice".

There is no way of ensuring safety. It is utterly impossible.

We should label foods—as genetically modified or not genetically modified—but that does not, and cannot, mean that there is precise safety in taking genetically modified food off the shelf and eating it.

Dr. Gibson: Does my hon. Friend agree that we cannot be 100 per cent. safe with anything? The words that are used are "negligible risk". When the chief medical officer gave evidence to the BSE inquiry, he used the word "negligible", not the words "extreme non-risk".

Joan Ruddock: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend, but the report uses the words "has ensured safety". The Committee is talking not about "negligible risk", but about "safety".

In paragraph 186, the Committee says:

"Genetic modification does not concern a single product or variety but will soon affect the whole spectrum of agriculture".

That is the truth about what will happen if we have genetically modified foods commercially grown in this country. That is why we cannot proceed on a case-by-case basis. We cannot ensure safety. The only certainty of commercial production of genetically modified foods is the uncontrollable and unpredictable release of artificially constructed gene pools into the wider environment. What does that say about our attitude to sustainable agriculture, to food safety and to public health?

The consequence of such a direction for our agricultural policy would be denial of choice to the consumer. That direction flies in the face of rational science and the clearly expressed views of the people of this country.

10.26 am

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): I am sorry that the debate will run out of time for some hon. Members and I hope that the House will have a chance to return to the subject in due course.

I agree very much with one of the points made by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley): the whole development in this area is taking place without democratic support or involvement. It is being driven not by consumers, by Members of Parliament or by farmers, but by a small number of multinational companies. They will have profound effects on the food that we eat, the environment in which we live and the way that we farm our land. To me, that is a democratic deficit and I hope that the Government will address it, so far as they can.

I made that very point to the Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food at the Select Committee on Environmental Audit in July last year. He said, "We are not in the driving seat." That was an honest admission, and it was absolutely accurate, but I want to know today how he will try to get the Government into the driving seat.

I have far more faith in the Minister, and in the Minister for the Environment, than I have in the good folk from Monsanto, Zeneca and other such companies. I want the Minister, not people in America who belong to multinational companies, to take decisions on our behalf—please get in the driving seat. The Government have been well-meaning on this issue, but were slow off the mark in May 1997. I hope that they will take action to remedy that.

I believe in the precautionary principle. We must be careful to ensure that we do not do anything that cannot be undone. On that basis, it is up to those who wish to change our food and our environment to show that that is safe, or as safe as can be. It is not up to other people—me, pressure groups or any hon. Member—to show that something is unsafe. The onus is on those people to show that what they want to do is safe, but they are not doing that. Instead, they are cynically pushing through genetically modified food—and pushing GM technology on to this country, Europe and the world—without giving anybody the chance to object. They are doing that through deliberately avoiding segregation of supplies, and by trying to influence those who are opinion formers in society, while paying less attention to public opinion. That was shown by the Monsanto internal evidence. Indeed, Monsanto is so popular that, after it conducted its massive

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publicity campaign, its own opinion poll showed that it was more unpopular than it was before that particular process took place.

Dr. Gibson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Baker: I had better not. The hon. Gentleman has intervened twice and I am conscious that other hon. Members want to speak. I am sorry; I should have liked to allow him to intervene.

People have significant worries. One is the effect on biodiversity, which is a real worry, not a lunatic concern of fringe groups. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and English Nature—the Government's own advisers—are saying that there is a real problem. The Government have to take that matter seriously.

The Government appear to have concerns. *The Independent on Sunday* revealed the risks of genetic foods and tells us that, allegedly, a Government report, commissioned by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions

"concludes that there are insufficient safeguards to stop the creation of hybrid multi-resistant plants.

It lists a series of 'gaps' in the UK's regulatory framework, leaving Britain's wildlife at serious risk of damage from genetically modified plants and other intensive farming methods."

Where is that report, and when is it being published? There should not be commercial planting of GM crops until those issues have been dealt with satisfactorily.

The Government should commit themselves to a five-year moratorium on the commercial planting of GM crops. That is my party's position, and I am happy to be hosting a meeting in the House shortly about such a five-year freeze, which will involve hon. Members from all parties. The Government must also commit themselves to securing diversity of supply to ensure that people who want GM food can buy it with confidence. They must also ensure proper labelling. It is not sufficient for labelling to show GM material detectible after the processing stage: it must refer to inputs into food. At the moment, 90 per cent. of GM material in food processing does not require labelling, and is only picked up afterwards. That is wrong and misleading for the consumer, and must be dealt with by European Union laws.

When the biosafety protocol is discussed in a few weeks in Colombia, the Government must deal with three issues. First, on the issue of liability, who will take the blame and who will have to pay compensation if something goes wrong? Will it be the farmer—I am sure the farmer does not want that—the Government, the World Trade Organisation or the companies that are pushing GM food on us? Let us have a clear answer to that. My view is that the companies should be liable, and I hope that the Government will confirm that.

Secondly, will agricultural commodities, such as maize and soya, be included in the protocol? They are at present, and the Government should confirm that that will continue to be the case. Thirdly, it would be helpful if the Minister of State would tell us which Ministers will represent us in Colombia. Will he confirm that the precautionary principle will apply to the discussions in Colombia and to the Government's position?

In a parliamentary answer to the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe) on 21 January, the Minister for the Environment listed the research being carried out by the Government. I congratulate them on initiating that research, but it involves fundamental matters such as the environmental impact of GM crops, safety of plant viral inserts, investigation of feral oil seed rape populations, a review of GM bioinsecticides and a review of parasitic nematodes for biological control of invertebrates. The list goes on. That research is continuing, so we do not know what the outcome will be. How can we have commercial planting of such crops and release matter into the environment when we do not know the results of the research? That is bad science.

Those who argue that GM crops are wonderful and safe, and that we should go ahead with them, should wait. What is the hurry? Let us wait until we are sure. It is irresponsible rashly to go ahead before information on the test results has been published.

My message to the Government is that they are moving in the right direction, and I have confidence that they are trying to approach this problem sensibly and seriously, but they must get a hold on the debate. The Minister must ensure that he is in the driving seat. The Government should be prepared to take on the World Trade Organisation. The WTO must not be allowed to argue that trade is everything, because there are environmental and animal welfare considerations.

The Minister referred to the rules of the WTO, but they have not been challenged. Will he undertake to challenge WTO rules to ensure that we have freedom of choice, and to protect the environment and animal welfare? That is what the House and people in the country at large want.

10.33 am

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): I shall be extremely brief, to allow someone else to speak. I support my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley) on her suggestion of a short-term moratorium on the planting of commercially grown GM crops. That would be welcomed by all sides, including Monsanto and Dupont. I have spoken to those companies, because it is important that Members of Parliament engage with the companies that propose these changes.

I was honoured to be chosen to lead an Inter-Parliamentary Union delegation to the Food and Agriculture Organisation last December on the outcome of the world food summit. It is important to recognise the opinions of many countries in the group of 77. I back the views of my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock). The almost unanimous view of the summit was that food security had remarkably improved worldwide in the past 30 years. Country after country from the developing world said that they had made major moves forward and were looking for food security—except those countries where there is civil war and other problems apart from those associated with growing crops.

It is important to knock on the head the idea that rapid change to GM crops is needed to feed the world. It is not. We must recognise the major changes in cross-breeding and the progress made in the work to find more orthodox solutions. There could be a big improvement in food distribution. Up to 80 per cent. of a crop may be lost between the farm gate and the consumer, so work could be done in that area.

I discussed the way forward with the FAO, which drew my attention to the codex alimentarius that it has undertaken jointly with the World Health Organisation in the past 30 to 40 years to establish a national register and examining board for all foods throughout the world, which is accepted as such. If we are to have a world standard, I strongly urge the Minister not to try to achieve that within the World Trade Organisation, but to work with the WHO and the FAO, which can ensure that all voices in the debate are heard, not just the biggest trading nations of the world.

Dr. Gibson: Does my hon. Friend agree that nothing will stop Uncle Sam in the drive to produce the foods America wants and to export them across the world? That is the problem. Whatever superstar status and agreements are reached, Uncle Sam will still push those products on to the market. There is no opposition to genetically modified crops or foods in the United States. Would my hon. Friend like to tell us why?

Mr. Colman: It is because the US Government have authorised these products. That was made clear in my discussions with Monsanto and Dupont, which almost felt hurt that we, on this side of the Atlantic, object to these foods. They believe that the argument was won 20 or 30 years ago. I suggest that this matter should be dealt with by the FAO and the WHO, because they have the appropriate mechanism. It is extremely important that the WTO is not involved, because the American Government have greater clout in that organisation than they do in the more egalitarian organisations, such as the FAO and the WHO.

10.38 am

Mr. Alan Clark (Kensington and Chelsea): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley) for presenting her case in a persuasive and well-rehearsed manner. I am sorry that, owing to the pressure of time, I must proceed directly to my conclusions.

I warn the hon. Lady that she will not get much change out of the Minister, although we know that his heart is in the right place. He will have to read out a speech written for him by officials. As we know, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is primarily concerned not to defend the interests of the consumer, but to look after vested interests within its purlieu of responsibility. The hon. Lady spoke for the consumer. It is most important for the House of Commons to be vigilant and to defend the interests of the consumer, whether they be financial, economic or, as in this case, health.

The consumer is under threat from a double squeeze: the multinationals and their domestic equivalent, the superstores that sell food. There is an unholy combination between those two forces to cajole, intimidate or, by financial inducement, persuade consumers that they are perfectly safe, and if they quietly swell the profits of these two bodies they will be all right. Large investment has been put into that objective.

I shall address myself to the Minister, because I suspect that he privately sympathises with my view. The common agricultural policy should be wound up and the money saved should be devoted to getting organic farming properly and sensibly funded. It is obvious that labelling must be introduced by legislation. It is hypocritical to say that the consumer must decide. How can the consumer decide if he does not know what he is consuming? The question of tariffs must be reconsidered. If organic, cleaner, better, more expensive and healthier food is to be undermined by cheap imports, some method has to be devised by the Government to level the playing field between what is possibly poisonous and what is clean.

10.40 am

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley) on introducing a timely debate. Both the subject and the thrust of her remarks have struck a chord on both sides of the House. I hope that we shall return to the subject soon, because many hon. Members wished to contribute at greater length than was possible and, indeed, I shall be able to touch on only one or two aspects of this important issue.

The Opposition recognise that genetically modified crops may have potential benefits, including the capacity to increase productivity in food growing and, possibly, to alleviate some of the environmental damage caused by intensive agriculture. However, more important and more urgent for the public than the potential future benefits are the clear and immediate dangers. Unfortunately, the Government's present policy ignores the actual environmental damage that the over-hasty adoption of the technology of genetic modification will cause. That policy appears to involve considering the health risks from genetically modified crops secretively and it fails to address the need to build up the public's confidence in what they are eating.

I shall deal first with the environmental anxieties. The United Kingdom differs markedly from the United States of America, where the farming areas and the wildlife areas tend to be separated. Here, in a smaller and more crowded country, farming practices have an immediate and substantial impact on wildlife. That alone makes a more cautious approach to the commercial release of GM crops essential. The evidence of English Nature to the House of Lords Select Committee sets out clearly the threat that GMOs pose to biodiversity and the genetic integrity of native species. If English Nature is to be overruled, the House is entitled to know on what grounds Ministers think they know better.

Does the Minister agree that the changes in crop management and farming practices that GM crops involve will have a substantial impact on wildlife? Should not the regulatory system examine the cumulative environmental impact of genetically modified crops and not just their effect on an individual basis? Should not the remit of the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment be widened to take fuller account of the effect of genetically modified organisms on biodiversity? Does the Minister accept that inserting genes into native species carries especially high risks and that very careful monitoring is needed of what happens after such organisms are released? Many other questions arise on this issue.

The Opposition fully support English Nature's call for a moratorium on the commercial release of genetically modified crops in Britain until the results of the current research on the environmental consequences are available. We believe that the European Union approval system for GMOs should be no less demanding than that for

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pesticides. That would mean that even if a GMO was approved in one European Union country, it would still need specific approval from the British authorities before being released here, so that the circumstances particular to this country could be taken into account. I endorse wholeheartedly the concerns expressed on both sides of the House in this debate about the issues of segregation and labelling.

The health risks may be a little less clear, although for some members of the public they are of the most direct concern. In the past year, the Government have banned people from eating beef on the bone, even though the risk of dying from eating it is now estimated to be less than one in 1 billion. We must assume, therefore, that the Government are confident that the health risks of eating food with genetically modified ingredients are even lower. After all, in the case of beef on the bone, the customer is at least aware when he or she is running the risk. Because of the bewildering refusal of Monsanto and others to separate GM soya from the standard crop, customers do not necessarily know when they are eating food with genetically modified ingredients.

If the Government are so sure that GM ingredients carry no health risk, why are they covertly using the supermarkets to collect data on customers who buy GM products? Is it so that the Government can examine whether, for example, those customers subsequently contract cancer or give birth to malformed children? Those are only two of the sets of data whose collection was discussed by an official committee a few weeks ago. Are there, in the minds of the Government or their advisers, some risks to human health after all? Are the public now being used by the Government as unknowing guinea pigs in a vast but secret human experiment?

Dr. Lynne Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Yeo: I am sorry, but I do not have time to do so.

The Government's approach is no way to build up public confidence; it is the reverse. Rushing ahead with the commercial release of GM crops while so many doubts remain unresolved will not advance the cause of GM technology. One of the mysteries is the Government's real aim. It clearly is not the protection of the environment, because they will not listen to the warning of their own statutory adviser on that subject. Their aim clearly is not the protection of human health, because they are trying to keep their fears secret. Perhaps the Government's aim is the service of those foreign-owned corporate giants whose commercial interests seem to depend so heavily on getting GM crops imposed around the world in the shortest possible time before too many awkward questions about the consequences of that imposition have been asked. We know that one such company, Novartis, was one of the 38 largest Labour party sponsors in 1997. It has been suggested that President Clinton personally lobbied the Prime Minister on behalf of another, Monsanto, although my parliamentary question on the subject remains mysteriously unanswered.

What is all the rush about? Here is an issue crying out for leadership and principles, not spin doctors and soundbites. But who do we find chairing the relevant ministerial committee? None other than the Minister for the Cabinet Office, the right hon. Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham). Not surprisingly, the mood of confusion among consumers is now changing rapidly to one of anxiety.

I invite the Minister to recognise that winning public acceptance for GM crops will require more openness from the Government and more clarity about their aims. I invite him to accept that little would be lost and much might be gained by slowing down the process through which he and his ministerial colleagues are taking Britain into hitherto unknown realms. Those realms may one day bring great benefits, but they are best entered after ensuring that the risks involved have been fully understood by everyone who is exposed to them and reduced to an absolute minimum.

10.49 am

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Jeff Rooker): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley) on securing this important debate, which is long overdue and welcome. It is the first proper debate on this subject in the past couple of years, notwithstanding the long debate on the last day before the summer recess when only three or four Members were present. That was more on constituency matters and related to seeds and trials.

The previous speech, which I assume was made with the full authority of the shadow Cabinet, makes it necessary for me to respond to the allegations of the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo). He said that there were clear and immediate dangers, but there is no evidence of that. He said that the process by which the Government consider biotechnology is secret. Since we came to power, we have appointed non-scientific lay advisers to every advisory committee that serves the Government in that respect. It has usually been two people, and they are all encouraged to network with each other and are not used as tokens. The minutes and agendas of those meetings are made public.

The Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes, the key scientific committee on this issue, was set up in 1988 and has an ethics adviser. Last year, after discussions with me, it held two open meetings—last February and in December—with outsiders such as Greenpeace and the Consumers Association to discuss the issue. Observers and non-members were allowed to speak, and did not only sit mute. The minutes were published, but the hon. Member for South Suffolk says that it is a secret process.

We have published a list of 59—at the latest count—suppliers of non-GM soya and maize for food producers to contact in America, Canada and Holland. That is an initiative of this Government. A new Cabinet Sub-Committee is examining the whole issue of biotechnology across Government so that decisions are not made jigsaw fashion but from the big picture. There has been no coercion of supermarkets. No attempt has been made, by this Government or any of our officials, to get individual details of customers' food buying. That was never intended or discussed at the individual level.

I thought that it would be useful to remind myself about labelling, but I did not realise how useful. It is nearly two years since the general election. I well remember the

decisions that Ministers take that lead to changes. It was probably late May 1997—the press release was on 7 June—when we changed labelling policy. When we came into office, we examined policy areas. We discovered that our officials in Brussels were under instructions from their political masters in the previous Government not to agree to the labelling of GM ingredients in foods. In practice, that would have meant that none of the foods currently on sale would have been covered by the labelling policy that that lot promoted when they were in government. We were again in a 14:1 minority.

Following discussions, this Government immediately changed the instructions to the British negotiators not only to get in line but to get in the lead on the issue. We put consumer interests first and foremost. No one can deny that, because the labelling regulations that have come through now are totally different from what has operated in the United States of America. The previous Government's labelling policy was, in practice, exactly the same as that which operated in the United States: not to label ingredients separately. That policy has been reversed. There are defects, which have often been raised in House. There are some loopholes to be closed. Additives and flavourings will have to be labelled, which the European Union is addressing. That must be dealt with. I am still in some difficulty on the process of manufacture. Labelling ingredients is one thing, but labelling for manufacturing processes is different because it transcends foods and goes into other products. It is a different regime.

We have just issued our consultation document on labelling for the catering sector so that it will be covered. I invited some catering sector bigwigs to ask them whether they really wanted GenetiX Snowball queueing up outside their restaurants telling customers that if they eat in them, they will not be told whether ingredients are genetically modified. The answer was, of course, no. We have consulted once already, and we have been consulting briefly over the past four weeks to get agreement before introducing regulations.

The House of Lords report was mentioned by everyone who spoke. I cannot respond on that. I and my right hon. Friend the Member for Oldham, West and Royton (Mr. Meacher) gave evidence to it in October. In the normal course of events, the Government will respond within two months.

There is no commercial growing of GM crops in this country, and none is planned. When it happens, its introduction will be controlled, not a free-for-all. Farmers, manufacturers and seed merchants will not be allowed to plant acre after acre willy-nilly without controls. It is not possible and it will not happen.

This Government have doubled aid for organic conversion. From April, there will be new subsidies to persuade people to convert. We have doubled the money for organic research. We will not waste that public money by allowing contamination from the uncontrolled introduction of GM crops.

Mr. Alan Simpson: I congratulate the Minister on toughening labelling regulations. In his current consultations, is he pointing out to the biotech industry and food retailers that under the Single European Act and the Food Safety Act 1990, the responsibilities of due diligence and product liability mean that they had better have full and unlimited public liability insurance against the class actions that will follow from BSE, and, almost certainly, on other matters?

Mr. Rooker: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who I know has a question on this at tomorrow's Question Time. Civil liability for damage caused by genetically modified organisms is governed by common law developed in the courts. On the basis of common law principles, the firm holding the marketing consent for the GMO crop can be held liable in law for any damages arising from ill effects attributed to that crop. As I made clear in a scrutiny Committee upstairs, the Government support the proposal in the European Commission Green Paper on food law to extend product liability to primary agricultural producers. There could not be a clearer warning to companies that if they have any doubts, they should not apply.

We are being rigorous with our regulation to the extent that if we and our advisory committees do not agree that a product should be approved, we will say that it has not had approval. Unlike, for instance, the Veterinary Products Committee, we are not constrained by the Medicines Acts in saying which products have not been approved. People hear only about the products that have gone through the system and assume that everything gets approved. That is not true. We will publish the minutes. There is no commercial confidentiality on this. If someone does not get through the system, we will name the company and the product so that people understand that we are not rubber stamping every application willy-nilly. It does not work like that.

I regret that I have no more time to answer the many positive points made by hon. Members. I hope that I have at least partly answered the disgraceful, outrageous speech made on behalf of the shadow Cabinet.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Can you confirm whether you have had a request from the Prime Minister to explain to the House his role in hounding someone out of his job because of his political or religious beliefs?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order for the Chair. No such request has been received and the Prime Minister is due to answer questions this afternoon, when there may be an opportunity for hon. Members to ask whatsoever they may choose.

London Fire Service

11 am

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): First, I must thank you for giving me the opportunity to introduce this Adjournment debate on the London fire service, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I introduced a similar debate a year ago and it is appropriate that the House should have an opportunity at least once a year to focus on the problems of that service. It is not a major public service in spending terms when compared with the national health service or education and it accounts for one third of 1 per cent. of all Government spending. However, it is a key service and one in which men and women risk their lives in our interests. Their concerns deserve proper attention.

I have not introduced the debate simply to create an annual ritual of reviewing the problems of the fire service in London; I have done so because the financial problems and cuts in the service with which we dealt last year have continued unabated. Last year, the debate took place in the context of the closure of two fire stations, Downham and Shooter's Hill, with the loss of 56 jobs. This year, the position is not entirely clear, but it seems likely—even if one is being fairly optimistic—that we will lose five fire engines and another 115 fire jobs as part of a process of cuts and economies in the fire service in London. That is the context and the motive for this debate.

The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth), responded to the debate a year ago and is to do so again today and I acknowledge that there are positive aspects. It is obvious that he has been defending his corner in his Ministry and in Whitehall debates about funding. The standard spending assessments for the past two years—1998–99 and 1999–2000—of 4.7 and 3.9 per cent. respectively are above the rate of inflation, which is a positive outcome. It compares favourably with the previous four years, when the settlements were about half the rate of inflation.

That torrid period in the mid-1990s created many of the serious problems in the service. The annus horribilis of the London fire service was 1997, when 12 tenders were withdrawn and people like me, with no background in the service, were drawn into the campaign to save our local fire engines. The problems have continued and, although the Government deserve some credit for having granted relatively favourable settlements, the underlying structural problems, notably the overhang of pensions and flexibility in the service, have not been tackled. I have no doubt that they are in the pipeline. The fire service is in continuing difficulty in London because the problems have not been tackled. I hope that the Minister will point the way forward.

The immediate crisis has come about because the London fire service is totally constrained in several ways. It has limited freedom of manoeuvre and is a single-service operation. First, it is constrained on the pay front. Half its costs are salaries and, although the SSA settlement has been reasonably generous, next year's 3.7per cent. SSA does not begin to compare with the pay settlement, which is 5 to 6 per cent. I do not begrudge the firemen their pay increase—I am sure that they deserve it—but there is no obvious mechanism by which that pay award can be paid for. The assumption is that the money will come from efficiency savings, but in practice those mean cuts in the fire service. After years of economies and cuts in overheads, that is primarily where such savings have to be made.

The second constraint is the pension problem, and I am sure other hon. Members will refer to it. The problem of unfunded pensions exists in several public services, but it is probably most acute in the fire service. Pension obligations are rising at twice the rate of inflation. About 20 per cent. of the fire budget goes in pension obligations and the percentage is rising every year because of the increasing number of fire service pensioners. Firemen are living longer, which is welcome, and the contribution rate is falling because fewer people are on the staff. It is a vicious circle whereby the more the service is cut, the fewer people are left to contribute. It is a downward spiral and it is creating an unsustainable financial position. I understand that the pension obligation will rise towards 30 per cent. of the budget in the next few years. That is a hopeless position and it is causing immediate pressure.

Reserves are a third constraint. In the past year or so, the fire service has been kept at a respectable level of service because it has been able to dip into its financial reserves. It drew £12 million last year and could probably draw some more this year. Out of the £7 million or so that is left, it could draw £2 million to £3 million more to remain roughly within sight of what the Government auditors consider financially prudent. Clearly, however, that cannot continue, unless the Government intend to hand the service to the London mayor with no reserves, which would be extremely dangerous. For example, an unforeseen increase in pension obligations would leave it illiquid and unable to meet its day-to-day obligations.

I do not fully understand the final constraint and I hope that the Minister will explain it. It is the way in which the new Government clawback arrangements for the so-called more sensitive form of capping that has been introduced will operate. I understand that the Government have said that they would tolerate a 4.5 per cent. increase in the precepting for local councils in London. I am not entirely clear what would happen if the fire service breached the ceiling. We are in new territory and I am not sure whether, when the Government introduced the new system, they had fully thought through what it might mean for precepting authorities, as opposed to normal, multipurpose councils. The new system has created significant uncertainty and difficulties for the service and I hope that that will be clarified during the debate.

Those severe constraints are hemming in the service. In the current and the coming financial years, even if the fire service draws down much of its reserves to a level that is verging on financial imprudence, uses the savings from last year—there were small savings because pension obligations were not quite as large as had been budgeted for—and breaches the Government's target for precepting up to perhaps a 7 per cent. increase, it will still have to close five fire tenders down. The situation could be worse. That is my analysis of the situation. What are the alternatives and what else could be done? Could the problems be avoided?

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): One of those stations is in New Addington in Croydon. In recent times, we have lost a station in Sanderstead and engines in Warlingham, Beckenham and Woodside. As the hon. Gentleman said, the situation is not sustainable. It is gradually leading to the degradation of the service.

Does he agree that one way forward would be to ring-fence the pension side of expenditure and have separate funding for the service, so that pension obligations do not undermine the provision of fire engines?

Dr. Cable: The hon. Gentleman's suggestion is sensible and it is one of several that I intended to propose to the Minister. There are different ways of dealing with the pension problem and the hon. Gentleman correctly identified one. The local colour that he has added to the debate from Croydon is appropriate. I hope that other hon. Members will give from their areas examples showing how the position is causing alarm throughout the capital.

Before dealing with that point, however, I shall run through the options available to the fire authority to head off the cuts under the present financing arrangements. They are all extremely unpalatable. One option is to run the reserves down to zero and pass on a hot potato to the new London mayor. One can imagine the mayor's problems, faced with a bankrupt fire service and having to trade off its problems against those of the Metropolitan police. That is an unpalatable option, but it needs consideration.

A second option is to break the bank in terms of capping limits and go up to a 10 or 11 per cent. increase in precepting. That would not involve an enormous cash increase for local councils, but it would be extremely unpopular with them. It would also test to breaking point the Government's belief that a clawback system should be applied to authorities that breach limits, and I suspect that the Government would not be able to let that happen.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): The bill received by local council tax payers in London shows separately the precepted amounts for both the Metropolitan police and the London fire and civil defence authority. Because people value the fire service as they do the police service, the politics of raising money suggest that an increase in precept would be one method that would appeal to the Government, if they were willing to accept it, and be acceptable to the people and to local authorities. People want the fire service and would be willing to pay a relatively small additional sum on a relatively small part of the total council tax bill. It strikes me that that way forward in ensuring that the fire service receives the resources it needs would be the easiest to deliver.

Dr. Cable: I thank my hon. Friend for that constructive suggestion. However, if the cuts crisis is to be avoided through precepting, the increase would have to be fairly substantial, in the order of 12 per cent., and it would require forbearance on the part of the Government. Perhaps the Minister will offer clarification on that point.

Drawing the threads together, I ask: where are the cuts leading? At what point do fire services become dangerously overstretched? This year, the fire service management have clearly gone to some trouble to prioritise firefighting equipment, through risk assessment carried out in a professional manner. They will argue that the five fire tenders identified are those whose loss will put the public least at risk, and that all sorts of improvised arrangements of that nature have to be adopted. However, there is a point at which such arrangements become positively dangerous.

I am no expert, but simple common sense dictates that, in the event of a major emergency or combination of emergencies, the fewer fire tenders and firefighters there are, the greater are the response times and the risk of death. The professional management of the fire service now believe that, if cuts in excess of the five now contemplated are made, we will not be in merely difficult territory; real danger will threaten the public. The Fire Brigades Union, which is more outspoken than the management, already believes that the increase in fire deaths—in 1997–98, the number increased from 67 to somewhere in the 80s—is probably attributable to the fact that fire cover was reduced. I am not sure whether that can be proved, but the figures are not encouraging.

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is not only the public who would be put at risk by the reduction in services, but fire crews themselves?

Dr. Cable: That is absolutely right and an important point. Unfortunately, disasters such as the King's Cross fire appear to be needed to remind us all of threats, not only to the public but to fire officers. In addition, although the fire service is right to have refocused its priorities from property to people, risk to property remains an element of concern.

Let me now outline some of the longer-term problems that the Government will have to address if the overall difficulty is to be alleviated. The first is the pensions problem. I have already sketched the difficulties, and most hon. Members already know the underlying problem. The difficulties started in the post-war period, a relatively easy period in which far more money went into the fire service pension scheme through contributions than was taken out. It is not altogether clear what happened to the surplus, but I suspect that, instead of being spent on the fire service, it leaked out to the Greater London council and was used to permit lower rates around London. We all had an apparently free lunch at the expense of the London fire service's pension provision, but we have now reached the point of having to pay the bill.

The pensions problem is wholly unsustainable, because contributions are likely to fall further. The Government have begun to address the issue of pension arrangements for new recruits to the London fire service; that is a creditable effort, but it does not deal with the problem of the pensions overhang and it may make the existing problem worse. New recruits may opt out of the pension arrangements and cease to pay their 11 per cent. contribution, which would result in lower overall contributions at a time when pensions outgoings increased because of longevity and redundancies. The problem will get wholly out of control if something is not done.

What are the options? The hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies) suggests that, within the SSA arrangements, pensions should be isolated from the rest of the budget and, in effect, be reimbursed by central Government. That would take pensions out of the internal financing arrangements of the LFCDA, which is my preferred option. A second option, which builds on the suggestion made by my hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), is to rely more heavily on precepting and to allow pension costs to be passed on to local authorities without restriction.

[Dr. Cable]

Various methods are available, but it is clear that the Government have not yet proposed a method of dealing with the pension problem. It is one thing to deal with new recruits and prospective pensioners, but the real financial difficulty arising from pensions has not yet been faced. I hope that the Minister will take the opportunity of this debate to address those problems.

My final point relates to the fire service's overall operational flexibility. The fire service management believe that their financial position would be easier if they were able to operate more flexibly. They are governed by a set of legislative regulations that has accumulated over the years. That severely inhibits their freedom of action, for example, in charging big business for fire prevention services, which appears in principle to be a reasonable thing to do. It also inhibits flexibility in other ways: it is a proper part of the Government's approach to social exclusion that the fire service should refocus its efforts on deprived areas, which are where most fires occur, but that sort of operational flexibility is currently inhibited by restrictive legislation. In last year's debate, the Minister said that he was willing to look at that legislation and to introduce a new fire Bill. I should be grateful for some information about when that will happen, how it will happen and what mechanism will be used, for that is an important part of the story.

I suspect that the House is of one mind on the fact that there is a serious short-term problem. I should like to know how the Government propose to deal with it, especially in matters, such as capping limits, where the Government have a responsibility. I should also be grateful if the Minister revealed how the Government intend to address the longer-term problems of pensions and fire service flexibility.

11.18 am

Dr. Rudi Vis (Finchley and Golders Green): I accept much of what the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) says and I shall try not to repeat his remarks, because that would be boring. Instead, I shall ask why the London fire and civil defence authority is affected by impending crisis.

Mr. Robinson, the chief fire officer and chief executive of the LFCDA, has informed us of the many financial difficulties he faces. Unfortunately, neither the LFCDA's financial figures nor the measures taken to stabilise them add up. The hon. Gentleman is correct to say that we may be here again next year if we allow the LFCDA management to continue to act as they have until now.

When Mr. Robinson was appointed, he must have accepted the job on the basis and the understanding that he had to run an efficient and safe fire service. I doubt whether he said that, although he would do that, he would not take account of pension arrangements; my guess is that he accepted those responsibilities.

In a letter sent to hon. Members in December, Mr. Robinson sets out the main problems. The pension scheme is unfunded; when it was started, in 1947, income was high and expenditure low, whereas last year expenditure was £77 million and income was only £16 million—a £61 million shortfall.

When did that start? As the hon. Member for Twickenham said, it started in the 1970s. My dog could understand the problem, if I told him about it. What has Mr. Robinson done to change the system from an unfunded scheme to a funded one? Absolutely nothing: neither he nor his predecessors took the necessary management action. So what does he say now? He says that a funded scheme for new firefighters could be a solution only in the long run—but if the process had been started in the 1970s, we would now be well into that long run and the problem would have been avoided.

The cuts in the fire service began just when expenditure started to exceed income. Since 1979, a lot of equipment has been lost, but the problem has not been solved, merely avoided. That is a management failure. What does Mr. Robinson propose to do? He proposes to make another 50 or 60 people redundant, or more, depending on the circumstances. What will those people do? They will draw pensions from the scheme, thus making the problem worse. That is not a solution—just the opposite.

Mr. Robinson also intends to make savings in the support areas. In a letter, he stated that 86 per cent. of income was spent on front-line services. However, the same letter stated that the service spent 21.4 per cent. of income on pensions. Subtracting 21.4 per cent. from the 100 per cent. income total leaves a remainder that is too small: it is not possible to spend 86 per cent. of income on fire services. The figures do not add up.

Mr. Robinson has said that the management structure has been changed. It is hard to imagine, but there used to be five layers of management. Now there are three layers, but that is still far too many. London's fire service has a military structure. Even in television programmes such as "London's Burning", one can see firefighters, grown men and women, touching their forelock to management. My goodness: everyone is afraid. Top managers have bigger cars, bigger offices and more assistants. The fire service has less to do with fires than with management. Priorities are upside down.

I am a Dutchman by birth, and I maintain that we could learn from the way things are done in the Netherlands. There, some pertinent questions would be asked, and the answers would provide the basis for action. What is the service for? It is a fire service. What does it do? It fights fires; it helps people in flats; it helps to get people out of lifts that do not go up or down; it helps in dealing with road accidents; and all sorts of other things.

Depending on the relevant regulations, the management should have ensured that there was income to cover the service's activities. In the Netherlands, a structure was built to allow the service there to fight for the necessary income. The LFCDA does things differently. The management structure comes first: only when that is in place does attention turn to fighting fires. That is the wrong way around. The LFCDA is not doing what it should be doing.

I have read the budget proposals, but they contain not a word about expenditure on civil defence, which is part of the LFCDA's responsibility and would have to be covered in any honest overview. Why have we not been told about civil defence?

It is a scandal, but it is common now to see a gleaming little car arriving at the scene of a fire. Who gets out? A management person. What does he know about fires? Nothing. He says, "Oh, my goodness, that's a fire." The management person stands there for about 10 minutes and then asks the firefighter in charge when it will all be over. On being told that it might take about two hours,

the management representative assumes that everything is under control and that he can go home. Why does that happen? The answer is that the management person is paid out of money for front-line services. That element is hidden in the budget, but we must not forget that. To my mind, it is unacceptable.

Why must firefighters retire at the ridiculously young age required? I know of many who are totally fit, as medical supervision proves. They want to go on working, either on active service or at desk jobs, but there is almost no way for existing firefighters to get into management. The structure is one of "us and them", and the management do not want them.

The LFCDA has protested that it has consulted all relevant people and groups. Has any firefighter been consulted, or been involved in any way? The answer is no. If I want to meet firefighters, rather than just go to head office, I have to ask it for permission. The situation with the LFCDA management is unbelievable. If my house should catch fire, I would want firefighters to come, not management.

The financial problems are severe, but the solutions are idiotic. In the literature that he has sent, Mr. Robinson states that overheads will be shared with other emergency services. There has just been a massive change in the police structure in Barnet, but the LFCDA did not get in touch to offer to share the overheads involved in reorganisation, which it could have implemented at the same time. No contact was made.

Changes to the north circular road mean that Finchley fire station is poorly placed. However, other emergency services have a very much better site near Finchley high road. Has the LFCDA taken up that option? It is considering the matter, and doing so in such a way that one might think that it may be working to that end; yet the budget report has details of cuts that have been made in ancillary services. More than 50 per cent. of personnel in the LFCDA property division—the authority's asset management arm—have been kicked out. Those are the very people who should talk to other emergency services about saving money—proper money, not improper money—but there has been no negotiation at all.

I believe that the LFCDA management are not capable, and that Mr. Robinson should go. In addition, I contend that its political control must be examined. Every year, three or four of the 32 councillors who represent London's boroughs are caught out. The other 28 councillors are very sympathetic, but what they are thinking is, "Thank God, it's not me this time." The result is that votes are held and cuts are approved in all the areas for which they are proposed. There should be an independent inquiry into the inefficient and irresponsible management of the LFCDA.

11.28 am

Mr. Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Canning Town): I congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) on securing this Adjournment debate. I have been trying to do the same, but he beat me to the punch in the ballot in November 1997, and he has done it again this time. I also congratulate him on getting here today. Yesterday, he was feeling distinctly unwell, but it is clear that the adrenaline has kicked in to enable him to open the debate so effectively.

I prepared for this debate by reading the *Hansard* report of the 1997 debate. That was an important debate, as is today's. I am sure that all hon. Members in the Chamber hope that we will not need a similar important debate next year.

I was a member of the London fire brigade for 23 years, and I belonged to the Fire Brigades Union, so I have some familiarity with the service and its problems. However, I congratulate the LFCDA on the quality of the briefings that it has sent to the London Members of Parliament. Those briefings helped us to identify the exact nature of the problems that the authority has to face.

I shall deal with some general issues, before reinforcing the financial concerns—specifically about pensions—raised by the hon. Member for Twickenham. My starting point is different from that of my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Dr. Vis): I believe that the fire service is extremely efficient. It received a glowing report from the Audit Commission in 1995, and last week's report and performance indicators show that the London brigade is operating at 91.5 per cent. efficiency.

That has happened against a backcloth of reductions since the Greater London council was abolished in 1986. The fire authority then assumed control of 10,000 staff, but the number has fallen to between 7,000 and 7,500 since then. Fire stations have been closed, appliances withdrawn and cuts made in various departments. Pressure has intensified year on year. Now we are threatened with the withdrawal of five more pumps this year.

All that has produced a consensus of disquiet stretching from the chief fire office, Mr. Robinson, to the councillors elected to the fire authority and the trade unions, the principal of which is the Fire Brigades Union, which represents operational firefighters. Despite the proud record of the London fire brigade, and of the fire service in general, the number of deaths and injuries in London and throughout the country has consistently been too high.

Most people understand that the politics of fire fit tidily with the Government's social exclusion initiatives, in the sense that the vast majority of people who die from fire are from the most vulnerable groups—the old, the sick, the poor and the disabled. There are distinct parallels between the Government's attempts to deal with social exclusion among the most vulnerable groups and what the service is trying to achieve by being more flexible in its responses. I commend the London fire brigade pilot scheme that is attempting to introduce smoke alarms to the Bangladesh community in Tower Hamlets, the Asian community in Ealing and pensioners in south London. Those are ways to improve precautions and safety in vulnerable communities.

A general difficulty for the fire service has been that the legislation creating it or allowing it to function has almost always been reactive rather than proactive. Even most recently, legislation has resulted from Hillsborough, Bradford and King's Cross. There is a powerful lobby for a new fire safety Act, and I know that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth), has been working on that. Such an Act could help brigades, including London's, by making it easier for business to understand and implement fire safety precautions; consequently, it would be easier to monitor and enforce those requirements.

[Mr. Jim Fitzpatrick]

As the hon. Member for Twickenham said, brigades such as London's have no opportunity to generate income from their expertise in training or fire safety. Such an opportunity would allow them to raise money to address their financial difficulties. The LFCDA is asking not for handouts from the Government, but for the power to help itself.

The main problem is the pension fund. Some people, including the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman), have said that pensions are too generous and expensive. Anyone who has studied the fire service will know that its occupational pension scheme has been an appropriate acknowledgement of the nature of the job and the sacrifices and dangers involved in it.

However, there is a problem. When the fire service pension scheme was introduced, few people lived to collect their pensions. Contributions from firefighters went to local authority expenditures. Now, however, as a result of the shorter working week, health and safety changes and breathing apparatus, firefighters live to normal life expectancy rates. That is what makes the scheme expensive. There are today more retired firefighters from London than there are serving firefighters. The pressure on the pension scheme is intensifying.

The Government have considered the problem. In a written parliamentary answer on 31 March 1998, at column *466* of *Hansard*, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said that he sought views on the fire service pension scheme before 31 July 1998. On 6 November 1997, the Under–Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East, said that there could be no quick fix:

"Any solution must be a long-term solution".—[*Official Report*, 6 November 1997; Vol. 300, c. 478.]

However, the problems of the fire service pension scheme have existed for 10 or 15 years. The Tories did nothing, and we are grappling with them now. Even a solution to the problem of expenditure now running at 20 per cent. of the fire authority bill would not sort out the authority's financial difficulties for 20 years. The pressure is immediate, and it needs immediate attention.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) has tabled an early-day motion showing the clear cross-party support for action on the pressure on London fire brigade. I have outlined to my hon. Friend my misgivings about some words in his motion, but it rightly identifies the pension scheme as the critical aspect.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary on last year's 3.9 per cent. increase in fire service expenditure. However, there was a 5.6 per cent. wage settlement, and, since wages account for 80 per cent. of the budget, that meant more pressure on the budget. London fire brigade's pension bill for this year is £77 million, and contributions are only £16 million. The retail prices index has risen by 60 per cent. since 1986, but the London fire brigade pensions bill has gone up by 284 per cent.

I commend the chief fire officer, the politicians on the fire authority, the Fire Brigades Union, the other unions and the public for highlighting the problems that cause us to debate the problems again today. I level no criticism at individual Ministers, or even at the Home Office. The reality of our predicament is that the fire service budget amounts to less than 0.3 per cent. of public sector expenditure, making it extremely difficult for us to receive the attention that we believe the problems deserve.

Most fire safety legislation is, as I have said, reactive. I hope that we do not need a disaster, as some people have said, before we can acknowledge deterioration in the service. The warning signs are there—from principal officers and from firefighters on the ground, showing that there is unanimity in the service. None of us wants to be able to say, "I told you so." There are solutions to the crisis facing the fire service, and facing London fire brigade in particular. I hope that the Minister can persuade the Home Office and the Treasury to grasp a difficult nettle.

11.37 am

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge): I shall be brief, as many other hon. Members want to speak in an important debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) on obtaining the debate and allowing us to air our views. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick), whose knowledge of and passion for the interests of firefighters and fire safety are well known throughout the House. I pay tribute to firefighters throughout London. We all know that they risk their lives daily in our cause.

In the London borough of Hillingdon, two pumps are threatened. One will be transferred from Hayes to Heathrow, and the other, at Hillingdon fire station, will be lost. There is all-party support in the borough for the retention of those services. I pay tribute to Councillor Anthony Way, who has actively represented the borough on the London fire and civil defence authority—I should point out that I am paying tribute to a Labour councillor. People are alarmed at the potential loss of those pumps.

It is difficult to understand how anyone can believe that such a decision will not increase the risk to the public. I have lived in the area all my life and the Hillingdon station—previously at Uxbridge—has always had two, if not three, pumps. In those years, the potential risks have increased. We have Heathrow, RAF Northolt, Hillingdon hospital, the rapidly expanding Brunel university, and a large shopping centre at Uxbridge, with another being built. It is difficult to understand how a 50 per cent. reduction at the Hillingdon station can be anything other than detrimental to the safety of my constituents and those of other hon. Members representing the London borough of Hillingdon.

The problem should have been considered earlier; it is not new. My constituents' views and those of all the hon. Members who are here today mean that the problem must be addressed. We fear that something will have to happen before people realise the problems that we face.

11.41 am

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): I am not surprised to see the Tory Benches almost empty, given the Conservative Government's record on the London fire service. Since 1986, three stations have closed, with the loss of 63 pumps and 1,200 jobs. During the same period, the number of calls has risen from 144,000 calls in 1986

to 188,018 in 1996—a massive increase. But the key figure is that, last year, household fire deaths rose from 67 to 89, an increase of about a third.

The chief fire officer, Brian Robinson, in his report, to which reference has already been made, makes it clear that he does not want any cuts. In section 4, he states that it would be

"preferable to make no reductions in the number of stations and pumping appliances until they can be considered in the context of the developing approach to protecting the community from fire and its effects."

One of the developments to which the chief fire officer refers is the Home Office review of fire safety cover, which is currently in progress, and will, I hope, lead to some pilot schemes in the near future with a shift towards a risk-based assessment.

My local station of Hornchurch has had two fire engines since 1936, since when there has been a huge expansion in roads—the M25, the A127, the A13 and the A12, all big roads—which see a lot of accidents, resulting in many calls on Hornchurch station and those around it. There has been an enormous increase in the number of people living in Havering, Hornchurch, Romford and Upminster and an enormous expansion in the number of office blocks, particularly in Hornchurch and Romford.

In 1997, the number of two-pump calls made to Hornchurch station—this is the key test, because we are talking about cutting 1.5 per cent. of the force there—was 396, compared with last year's figure, which was about 430, a significant increase. Hornchurch will, therefore, be in real difficulty if the second pump disappears this year.

The total number of calls made to Hornchurch last year was 1,410. That is a great deal more than the official figure, because it includes 450-odd calls from neighbouring grounds. We are therefore talking about a busy station with a high number of two-pump calls.

That brings me to the Fire Services Act 1947, which does not recognise, for example, road traffic accidents, which are a major cause of calls on a station such as Hornchurch. That legislation was framed when there were many fewer cars—only a few hundred thousand—on the road, compared with 22 million today, most of which seem to whiz through Havering at one time or another. That has led to an enormous increase in the calls on Hornchurch station, and on Dagenham and Wennington and the Essex brigade, which has not been met by legislation.

During the past two years, I have discussed the problem many times with my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary and I know that he is genuinely concerned about it. The fact that the duties of the fire service have changed enormously during the past 50 years should be recognised in legislation.

My main point today is to ask the Government to call a moratorium on the proposed cuts to the fire service—the five pumps that are under threat. The Home Office fire cover review currently in progress will, it is hoped, result in a risk-based assessment.

Ms Linda Perham (Ilford, North): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his campaign in Hornchurch. Does he agree with other hon. Members that the main problem is the pensions issue, and that, unless that is addressed, the LFCDA, and its successor, the Greater London authority, will continue to face problems, such as that at my station at Hainault, which is faced with day crewing? Does he agree that there is much public support in London against the cuts?

Mr. Cryer: I certainly agree that there is enormous public support for the fire service, and the pension issue is a key problem. It takes up £70-odd million from a budget of about £300 million. Public support for the fire service in my area has been superb. The firefighters have mounted a magnificent campaign. Only last week, on one day alone, I, along with a number of firefighters from Hornchurch, handed in about 11,500 completed public consultation leaflets to the LFCDA offices at Albert embankment, just across the Thames. We also have a petition with 40,000-odd names on it, and I alone have had more than 1,000 letters, so the public support is there. Self-evidently, people clearly do not want to see cuts in the fire service.

Because of the particular factors affecting the London fire service, I should like the Government to call a moratorium on fire service cuts for the foreseeable future until we have a comprehensive review of the fire service. The chief fire officer makes it clear in his report that he does not want to make the cuts, and we await the Home Office review of fire cover. We also await the new authority and the mayor. The LFCDA has £5 million in reserve in a £6.5 million underspend this financial year, and next financial year it may well have another underspend. Until we have the Home Office report and the mayor and the new authority in situ, directly accountable to the people of London, I should like there to be a moratorium on fire service cuts.

11.48 am

Mr. Keith Darvill (Upminster): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), and I associate myself with the remarks already made by my hon. Friends the Members for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick) and for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer).

My constituency is served by Hornchurch fire station. I have studied in some detail the review of fire cover in London and have recently visited the Hornchurch station and the Romford station, which in part covers my constituency, where I have had extensive talks with the firefighters and local management. I have also visited the command headquarters on Albert embankment and had talks with senior officers there.

Since the publication of the review and the chief fire officer's recommendations, I have received many representations from constituents who are concerned not only about the Hornchurch station, but the other appliances at Addington, Hillingdon, Finchley and Heston. I am opposed to the recommendations and, although my constituents are concerned chiefly with Hornchurch, they associate themselves by implication with the other fire stations.

Of course I appreciate that the reductions in cover are driven primarily by financial factors. During my research, I became all too aware of the problems arising from the funding of the firefighters' pensions and the difficulties that this has imposed on the LFCDA. I shall deal with the financial aspects in a moment.

My primary reasons for opposing the reduction in the number of fire appliances are strategic cover, the ability to save life, risk-based assessment and various local

[Mr. Keith Darvill]

issues. On the subject of strategic fire cover, the review naturally refers to Home Office minimum standards. However, section 4.8 of the review reminds us that they are minimum standards, and no more than that. The standards to which we should aspire in the provision of public services—particularly emergency cover—should not be the minimum.

Section 4.10 of the review highlights the fact that each local station does not provide fire cover for a particular location. My concern is for the level of strategic cover: if we cut five fire appliances, I fear that in the event of a major incident such as the King's Cross disaster or the bomb on the Isle of Dogs, the London brigade will not be able to respond adequately and maintain reasonable cover for the rest of the metropolitan area. Although in the fullness of time the terrorist threat in London may abate, it is too early to be confident of that.

Furthermore, I believe that road congestion in London is almost certain to have an adverse effect on attendance times. Projected vehicle ownership statistics and average car journey times in London are surely relevant factors. London roads have been close to gridlock several times. Such occasions will inevitably increase, with adverse effects on emergency services. Sections 4.21 to 4.24 of the review state that in eight areas

"difficulties are being experienced in meeting recommended response times."

The loss of five more appliances in London could, indirectly, cause the recommended response times in the areas in question to deteriorate even further.

Section 4.32 states that, in the chief fire officer's professional judgment, the minimum number of appliances that need to be kept ready to attend fires will be greater than the theoretical minimum needed to provide cover strictly in line with the Home Office's minimum recommended standards.

I concur with the point made in the review that there are strong arguments for keeping fire stations open and for the number of appliances not to be cut at stations covering areas of local deprivation. The key point is whether the right balance of strategic cover will be provided to maintain sufficient cover to ensure that the brigade remains able to respond effectively to major incidents and can deploy resources quickly if and when required.

Mrs. Eileen Gordon (Romford): Will my hon. Friend join me in praising all the firefighters and members of the public who are fighting the cuts? Does he agree that perhaps the best plan of action would, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) said, be to impose a moratorium on the cuts until the Greater London authority and mayor are in place? After all, it is they who will decide the future of the fire service in London, and to hand over to them stations that have lost pumps which cannot be replaced would give them a bad start when they come to form an overall picture of fire services in London.

Mr. Darvill: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I am aware of her work in that campaign.

I am seriously concerned that a reduction in the number of appliances in London will mean that the LFCDA will not be able to maintain strategic cover to the acceptable standard required by my constituents.

The ability to save lives is a very serious matter. It is clear that the emergency services now have the ability to save more lives than ever before. One of the reasons for the continued advances in their lifesaving ability is the improvement in paramedic support in ambulances and the involvement of specialist teams of doctors who attend serious incidents, especially road traffic accidents—RTAs.

I am advised that the attendance of firefighters and appliances at serious RTAs and in other situations where accident victims are trapped is often essential to ensure that those victims are released quickly from their entrapment, thus enabling doctors and paramedics to stabilise their condition and ensure that they are transported speedily to intensive care facilities.

Although many RTAs happen on highways other than motorways, it should be noted that the appliances to be removed are situated in outer London stations closest to the M25. If the number of fire appliances throughout London is reduced by five, the ability to respond to such situations will be diminished, so the recommendation should not be implemented.

Another primary reason for opposing the recommendations is risk-based assessment. I note that in section 3.13 of the review, the authority has recommended that the Home Office risk categories place undue emphasis on the value of property, as opposed to prevention of injury and loss of life. The current risk categories do not appear adequately to reflect the complexity of risk in densely populated urban areas.

Section 5 of the review deals with issues likely to impact on the provision of fire cover in future. I note that a range of matters is currently under active consideration, which is likely to result, possibly within two years, in a new risk-based approach to protecting the community from the effects of fire. In light of all the points set out in section 5, the main thrust of which I agree with, I believe that the recommendations to reduce the number of fire appliances in London should at least be postponed until after the matters under active consideration have been determined.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Fifteen years' of constituency experience leads me to share the hon. Gentleman's concern about the move—perceived and often real—from people-based, densely populated area risk assessment to property-based assessment. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there should be public consultation by the LFCDA—using all its evidence and expertise—on how to assess risk, and that only after the results of that consultation have been subject to scrutiny by bodies such as Parliament should the matter go back to Ministers and the fire authorities so that they can decide on the number of machines and personnel needed to respond to the perceived risk for a given area? That could apply not only in London but elsewhere. Unless we get the assessment of risk right, we shall never be able properly to project what is needed by way of appliances and personnel for 24-hour cover.

Mr. Darvill: I do not disagree with that. I understand that the Home Office is examining those issues at the moment.

Any decision implemented now may need to be reversed in a relatively short time, and there could be adverse financial implications if fire appliances are removed and subsequently returned.

I acknowledge that ground calls, particularly at the Hornchurch station, have declined over the years—there are now 960 a year. Appendix C1 of the review sets out the possible impact on surrounding stations. I have queried that estimated impact, and have written to the chief fire officer, setting out my reasons for doing so.

It seems to me that insufficient weight is being given to off-ground calls and road traffic accidents. In fact, it appears that little or no account is being taken of RTAs. Greater significance should be attached to the service that the fire brigade renders at the scene of such accidents. In 1996 in the Hornchurch area alone, there were four fatalities, and 51 people were injured. In 1997, there were fortunately no fatalities but 31 people were injured; and up to mid-December last year, there were three fatalities and 31 people injured. Those are the figures for road incidents to which the fire brigade was called, not for road accidents in general. Also, 66 drivers and passengers needed releasing from cars involved in accidents. As I said, these statistics relate to the Hornchurch ground alone, but firefighters in Romford inform me that their experiences are similar.

I do not envisage any short, medium or long-term reduction in the number of RTAs that the fire service will be required to attend. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch said, Hornchurch is close to the A13, A127, the A12 and the M25. However, it is not only on motorways and trunk roads that serious RTAs occur. In fact, it appears that they occur on the network of rural and semi-rural roads, mainly in the D fire risk category areas. These accidents occur when the M25, the A127 and the A12 are congested and motorists exit the main roads to use country lanes with which they are unfamiliar. These roads are narrow, unlit and much more hazardous. Drivers are unfamiliar with the conditions and, as a consequence, RTAs occur. The fire brigade is frequently called out in those circumstances. London is densely populated and built up, but the outer areas of London are linked with the countryside, and that is where the accidents that I have described take place. The reasons that have been set out so far are surely sufficient for opposing the proposed reductions.

The situation with the firefighters' pay formula and pension and the reduction in reserves are the main reason why we are in the present position. We should regard firefighters' pensions and pay as contractual obligations of the public. It is no good complaining about pensions or the level of the award. We have entered into employment contracts with those public servants and we must fund them properly.

I am aware that there are many difficulties, and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister will refer to some of them in his reply. It is clear that public finances remain tight. Despite that, additional funds have already been directed to the fire service. Council tax precepts will not be able to meet the shortfall. Reserves have been depleted, but our constituents do not want to see reductions in fire cover, especially when they are being asked by the borough councils to pay increased council taxes that will be above the rate of inflation.

I hope that the Minister will be able to allay my fears about the future of the fire service in London. If we do not solve the problems that we have been discussing this morning, it is as sure as anything is in politics that the LFCDA will be back next year and the year after with more reductions. Eventually, the chief fire officer will not be able to recommend further reductions. The percentage of the LFCDA's budget that is devoted to pensions and wages will continue to increase. What will happen then? The Government should grasp the nettle now and demonstrate what they can do to solve another problem which they inherited partly from the Conservative Government. I look forward to my hon. Friend's reply.

12.2 pm

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): The genesis of the problem has been thoroughly and more than adequately explained by my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick) and by the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable). I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. It is important that we recognise that the problem was identified a long time ago. I say that as the ex-chair of finance of the Greater London council. However, whenever the problem was identified, even in those dark mists of time, there was a lack of co-operation from central Government, and subsequently from individual boroughs, in addressing the problem.

I commend the stewardship of the London fire and civil defence authority after the GLC. I say as an aside that there were no pension holidays when the GLC was involved. The problem with the GLC's budget was that, in terms of revenue and capital, it was virtually capped by this House. In particular, I commend the stewardship of Councillor Tony Ritchie of the LFCDA after the abolition of the GLC. I have been present at meeting after meeting during which he has explained to borough leaders and Ministers—this happened year in, year out—that the problem was becoming worse year by year. I have listened to cant and hypocrisy from individual borough leaders. They went out on the streets campaigning against firefighting cuts while refusing to support an increase in the precept. Ministers argued against any further increase in support for the LFCDA to tackle funding problems while always promising reviews. That happened year after year without anyone tackling the problem. I do not blame the LFCDA for what has happened.

I heard what my hon. Friend and comrade the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Dr. Vis) said about management. I do not want to take up his comments. However, I know that at every consultation meeting at which I have been present, with the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall), management have made clear their attitude on finance. We are talking about a financial problem and not about service delivery. The best is being made, with limited resources, of a very bad job.

There have been various wage increases over the years. I and others have been campaigning since the days when I was with Terry Parry, the general secretary of the Fire Brigades Union—God rest his soul—during the first major dispute. In those days, we had a hard time even securing a decent standard of living for firefighters; some of them were on poverty wages while providing a good service.

Time after time, Governments have commended firefighters for the wonderful role that they play and then refused properly to remunerate them. That is complete hypocrisy. I commend the FBU on all its negotiations with the GLC as I commend the LFCDA subsequently. They showed a flexible approach in tackling problems jointly with management. They examined the budgets and

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put forward options that involved changing working practices, sometimes to the detriment of their members, in an attempt to save jobs.

The stewardship of the LFCDA under Councillor Ritchie and his colleagues has been superb in highlighting problems and trying to tackle them without co-operation from central Government and, on most occasions, the boroughs. The firefighters and others have commended the authority on the job that it has done with such limited resources during this period.

I shall refer to the implications for my patch. The hon. Member for Uxbridge briefly examined what has happened in Hillingdon. In the middle of my constituency is Heathrow. The proposals that we are discussing will remove a pump from Hayes, Hillingdon and Heston. These areas surround the airport, which is one of the biggest potential disaster areas in the country. Air disasters do not usually happen at the airport itself. We last had an air disaster in 1956, when an aeroplane dropped out of the sky at Staines before it could reach the airport. That is the risk area. I am concerned that we are not taking into account the real problems that the LFCDA will face in future.

Mr. Clive Efford (Eltham): I intervene as someone who lost a fire station in my constituency last year. Local people are concerned about the enormous amount of development that is taking place around Woolwich and the millennium dome. That development will increase the amount of fire cover that is required to be provided by local fire stations, which will reduce their ability to serve the local community.

Does my hon. Friend agree that perhaps there is an opportunity for additional resources to be raised under the Greater London Authority Bill, with fire cover advice being provided through the LFCDA, where there is a great deal of expertise? I have in mind Canary wharf and what the LFCDA received for the advice that it gave in that instance. Perhaps we should examine that approach urgently.

Mr. McDonnell: My hon. Friend makes a valid point which I shall move on to in a moment.

The thrust of our argument is that for the sake of us all we should stand back for a period and then tackle the problem once and for all, rather than having another round of cuts and decisions put off for another year—followed by another round of cuts next year and the year after. If the Government are about anything, they are about saying, "Let us tackle these problems objectively and seriously to secure a long-term future."

The situation is sometimes almost Pythonesque. My hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford) may think that he has problems, but in my constituency I have the airport, the M25, the M4, the M40 and the A312. The hon. Member for Uxbridge and I share, as it were, Northolt. There are many bizarre proposals for the development of Northolt. In addition to that, I am in the middle of a single regeneration budget area. The massive development that has been proposed is not yet even at the planning stage, but it will go ahead because the money has already been allocated. We have the risk of terminal 5 and even a third runway. At the same time we are cutting the very basis for tackling any firefighting problems that might arise as a result of the developments to which I have referred.

I was at Camden town hall as a local government officer on the night of the King's Cross disaster. I and others were present at a social services committee when the news came of the fire. Our job was to prepare the mortuaries for the dead. I remember all the lessons that we were supposed to learn from King's Cross about investment, resources and training in the long term. No more were we to have short-term measures or cuts. Even then, we were talking about risk assessment. However, the present risk assessments are archaic. They take no account of road traffic accidents.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill) about the problem of rat running. Cars coming off the M4 and M40 rat-run through my constituency, as they do through Uxbridge. Deaths occur when this happens. Firefighters are called to attend these accidents. My constituency can be at risk because the gridlock in the area is such that we cannot get transport into it.

I appeal to my hon. Friend the Minister to agree that we should act on all fronts and on all sides. I agree with the proposal for a moratorium. There are three reasons why we want a breathing space in tackling the problem. First, the GLA is coming. That will give us an opportunity over the coming weeks to put new powers in place that will enable us to tackle the problems. We are in a position to give new powers to the new authority, if necessary, to increase charges, and to consider new forms of revenue funding that will stand us in good stead in the long term. Secondly, the review of risk assessments is forthcoming. Why jump the gun before that report is made? Thirdly, we must examine the pensions fund report from central Government that we have been promised. That will tackle the problem once and for all.

I urge the Government to proceed with a moratorium. If that means a larger precept increase than would normally be allowed for one year, let us do it, or if it means a combination of a special grant and an additional increase in the precept, let us do that, but let us not put our constituents' lives at risk for yet another short-term fix.

12.10 pm

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): I congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) on his success in the ballot for this debate. It is a timely opportunity for the House to discuss these matters before the meeting of the London fire and civil defence authority on 18 February. My only criticism of the hon. Gentleman is that all the solutions on which he concentrated would require more expenditure and he made no reference to the alternatives, as I shall, and as, I am sure, the Minister will.

Before I address the key issue, mostly in the form of questions to the Minister, I pay tribute to the courage and bravery of firefighters not only in London but throughout Britain. They are always there when we need them and they serve us well.

The key issue that the House and, on 18 February, the London fire and civil defence authority must address is the need to set a budget for the coming year. That will require difficult choices to be made. It may be that the only way in which a budget can be set and council tax precepts kept within Government guidelines will be to

implement the proposal to withdraw five pumps—about which there has been much discussion this morning—unless the Government relax the capping limit.

The first issue that I want the Minister to address relates to the LFCDA leaflet on the consultation document. One of the four options that was canvassed was that there would be no cuts at all and, as a result, there would be a 20 per cent. increase in council tax. The sums of money involved are not enormous, but the precept would go up by 20 per cent. The House needs to know what will happen if the consultation result demonstrates that a majority are in favour of paying more than the Government guideline. It is all very well to have consultation, but sometimes the answer may not be palatable to Ministers.

If the Government insist that the precept guideline must be adhered to, responsible councillors from all parties will have no option but to support the chief fire officer—

Mr. Efford: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Greenway: I have very little time in which to make my comments, and I did not intervene on any other hon. Member who spoke.

Responsible councillors will have no option but to accept the chief fire officer's recommendations, provided—this is the big caveat to which hon. Members have referred throughout the debate—that they are satisfied that fire safety standards are not compromised.

I sat through the debate with a sense of deja vu because there were similar debates when I sat on the Benches where the hon. Members for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick) and for Upminster (Mr. Darvill) now sit. In my constituency, a two-pump station had one of its pumps removed, and there were petitions and expressions of local concern and anxiety.

I make two points about that to the House. First, the passage of time has revealed that the fire officer's assessment was correct. More important—this is the nub of the problem with the proposals—the cover provided is greater than the Home Office minimum standard, and that is the thrust of what is happening now. There is a limit to how far the policy can go. As long as a gap remains between what is provided in a given area and the Home Office minimum level of provision, there will continue to be opportunities to make such cuts.

I said that I would discuss alternatives to simply spending more money. The chief fire officer acknowledges that there is scope for greater efficiency and that great strides have been made on that in recent years. In the briefing that he sent to hon. Members, he seems to take pride in the fact that during the past seven years, £20 million per annum has been removed from the budget by efficiency savings, and that, of more than 800 staff reductions during that time, only 8 per cent. involved uniformed staff. That is a creditable performance, and the House needs to give credit where it is due.

Conservative Members agree that there are new ways of providing services. I listened to what the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Dr. Vis) said about liaison, but it must make sense to pursue greater liaison with other emergency services, and that is happening not only in London but in other parts of the country.

More can be done to prevent fires, and the private and commercial sector, in particular, has already done that. We need to redeploy resources to modernise delivery of the service. We need to find new ways to increase income and attract sponsorship. There may be scope for amending the Greater London Authority Bill—I am delighted to see here my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway), who is piloting the Bill through Committee for the Opposition—to provide the new authority with legal powers in its fire responsibilities. Will the Minister consider whether he agrees with that assessment?

My fundamental question for the Minister is whether the Home Secretary would accept the advice of the chief fire officer and approve the five pump withdrawals, if that decision is made. Does he agree with that? Has he been advised that the fire standard could be met if the five pumps were withdrawn? What advice has the chief inspector of fire services given on meeting the minimum standard? Has that advice taken account of the increased demand for the fire services to provide emergency cover to road traffic accidents on the M25, which runs through many of the areas that will be affected by the proposed pump withdrawals?

Has the Home Office done any research on the resource implications of the proposed shift from risk-to-property assessment to risk-to-life assessment, and with what result? What impact will that have on the fire cover standard, which underlies the proposals made by the chief fire officer for London?

I also want to ask the Minister about resources and efficiency savings. I am surprised that not one of the speakers in the debate referred to the fact that the Government have imposed a 2 per cent. efficiency saving per year for three years, which has of course exacerbated the shortfall of income against revenue currently experienced by the London fire service. Did Ministers know that there had been a 5.6 per cent. pay increase for the fire service when they were setting that 2 per cent. efficiency saving? Did they know that pension costs already accounted for over 20 per cent. of revenue and were getting worse? I agree with much of what has been said about the need to deal with pensions. I hope that we shall have the opportunity to debate that on another occasion.

Does the Minister agree that it would be sensible to use up to £4.5 million of the London fire service's reserves? Does he accept, however, that that could not be repeated? Does he agree with those who express concern about the need for the new Greater London authority to have some reserves? How will Ministers measure whether the 2 per cent. efficiency increase has been delivered and not merely reflected in cuts and use of reserves? How does the Minister anticipate that the 2 per cent. efficiency savings will be delivered in years two and three?

I do not want to cross swords with the hon. Member for Poplar and Canning Town, but I am concerned that some of the comment in the Fire Brigades Union's latest magazine on the scale of potential cuts as a result of the second and third years of efficiency savings was rather alarmist. Perhaps we can address that.

We think that the Government are right to continue the previous Government's policy of making the fire service more efficient, as well as more effective, to obtain better value for taxpayers. The Government will need to be flexible, to support fire officers, members of the fire service and hon. Members who have concerns, and review whether the 2 per cent. year-on-year efficiency saving is

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deliverable without compromising public safety. Above all, this debate has shown that the public need to be reassured that any changes will lead to a better fire service and a safer capital city.

12.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. George Howarth): I join everybody else in congratulating the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) on securing his second debate on the fire service in London, which has provided us with a useful opportunity. I understand the importance that all hon. Members who have taken part in the debate attach, on behalf of their constituents, to the quality of the fire service in our capital city. As the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) and several of my hon. Friends have conceded, we have every reason to be proud of our fire service. It is a great privilege for me to work with a service that is highly regarded by the public, and which achieves consistently high standards of performance—often, as many hon. Members have said, in very difficult and hazardous circumstances.

In the time available, I doubt whether I shall be able to cover all the points that have been raised. I undertake to reflect on *Hansard* and to write to hon. Members in more detail and at greater length on any points that I do not cover. My comments similarly apply to the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway).

Last week, the Audit Commission published its timely report on performance indicators for local authorities, which showed that, in 1997–98, the London fire brigade met the national standards for responding to fire calls on 91.5 per cent. of occasions. That is its best performance in the four years that the Audit Commission has been collecting such figures. The figure was slightly below the national average of 96 per cent., but, given the more problematic circumstances of a capital city, several of which have been described, it is a very creditable performance. My hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Dr. Vis) made some very trenchant criticism of the London fire and civil defence authority, and the brigade and its leadership. He should take time to read the report. Perhaps then he would take a slightly different view.

I should like to say a word about pensions, which have been mentioned quite extensively. We of course recognise the implications of increasing pension expenditure for the overall settlement and for changes to the fire standard spending assessment distribution formula for 1999–2000. Although it has not been said in this debate, it has occasionally been reported as fact that it is not true that we take no account of pensions in the formula. The matter is given weight; we consider it important. We are considering responses to the pensions review in consultation with colleagues, and over coming months plan to publish our proposals for the future of the firefighters pension scheme.

We are keen to adopt a consultative approach; we shall be consulting all interested bodies as the proposals are developed. I say to hon. Members who have said that there has been very little action, even though the problem has been apparent for many years, that we are moving towards some solution. It may not be ideal or short term, but we recognise the need to consult. Points and suggestions made in the debate will certainly be taken into account.

We published the findings of the review that the previous Government set up. I do not want to be too partisan, because nobody else has been, but it was notable that the previous Government ensured that it was not published before the general election. They left us to publish it. We did so, and are consulting on it. I wanted to make that point because it is important.

The fire authority for London, like all fire authorities in England and Wales, will of course be subject to the proposed duty of best value, which is set out in the Local Government Bill. That places an explicit duty on authorities to secure continuous improvement of the delivery of their services. The focus is on quality and efficiency. The driving force will be the use of performance indicators, standards and targets, and most important, the use of various ways of consulting the public. The importance of that has emerged in several ways.

The hon. Member for Ryedale raised the question of efficiency. There is continual scope, not just in London but elsewhere, for greater efficiency in the fire service. I welcome the fact that the leader of the London fire authority, Councillor Ritchie, is a member of the forum that is considering best value for the fire service. So there is scope for best value and greater efficiency in London.

I should point out, although it is slightly repetitive to do so, that, following the comprehensive spending review in July, we announced that authorities in England would receive an overall increase in the fire service element of the total standard spending of £143.6 million—an average increase of 3.5 per cent. That includes £47.1 million—or 3.6 per cent.—for 1999–2000. Details of the settlement were published on Monday, and will be debated in due course. I am particularly proud that London has done very well over the past two years, as the hon. Member for Twickenham acknowledged.

I should say a brief word about applications concerning fire cover arrangements—several have been referred to—that the London fire authority may decide to make that would affect the constituents of several hon. Members present. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will grant approval for such applications only if he is satisfied that the proposals have been widely publicised; that representations have been considered by the fire authority and, most important, that Her Majesty's fire service inspectorate advises that national standards for fire cover will be maintained. We take those responsibilities very seriously. Before we agree to any such proposal, we must be convinced that it does not represent a risk to the public.

This has been a good debate. Unfortunately, time has not allowed me to acknowledge and respond to every point. Although many items that arose under the previous Government still need to be discussed before the fire service is absolutely as we would want it to be, we aim to maintain the mood of co-operation in local government and other interests. Between us, we can start to move on and to modernise an already good fire service, to take us into the next century—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order.

The Muslim World

12.30 pm

Mr. George Galloway (Glasgow, Kelvin): Britain's relations with the Muslim world are unarguably at a difficult and testing juncture, and in this debate I want to probe the Government's mind on the difficulties and tests that face them in relation to the strategically placed, vast and growing world of Islam, with its more than 1,000 million adherents across many continents—including, of course, perhaps 2 million citizens of our own country.

Inasmuch as my speech, limited as it is to 15 minutes, will be something of a Cook's tour, I hope that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will at least heed the general direction of my concerns, some of which are well enough known to him, but not to others.

I want to start at home, with what I believe will be a major headache for the Government in the weeks to come—the trial of a large number of British nationals in Yemen. They are charged with forming an Islamic extremist terror group with intent on creating mayhem in that poor Arab country, which has already suffered much from the near decade-long crisis in the Gulf. Public opinion in the Arab world is simply dumbfounded at the allegation that, rather like selling coals to Newcastle or sand to Arabia, Great Britain may now be exporting such terrorism to Muslim countries.

I do not want to add to the difficulties of the Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Fatchett), but I must tell him that I do not like the look of Finsbury's Park's "ayatollah", Mr. Abu Hamza al-Masri—and I do not, of course, mean his hooks for hands or his glass eye. I do not suppose that I am alone in that opinion, but the difference is that I never liked the look of the rag-bag of obscurantists who constituted the so-called "holy warriors" of the Afghan jihad. But of course these elements, who have now razed Afghanistan to stone age ruins, and who have grievously affected the economic, social and political life of neighbouring Pakistan, were conceived, financed, armed, trained and politically supported, not only by the United States of America, but, it is clear only now, by previous British Administrations. So we and our allies played Dr. Frankenstein in the creation of some of the monsters that we now bemoan.

Of course the individuals on trial in Yemen must be tried fully in accordance with the law in that country. That criterion is an important distinction from the demands being made in some of the commentary on the case. Of course Yemen will be expected to conform to the international norms to which it has signed up, and to the norms of diplomatic practice; but terrorist suspects cannot expect to be dealt with differently in Yemen just because they are British. The irony will not escape the House that the alleged targets of the alleged terrorists included the British embassy, which is now being asked to mount a defence campaign.

I regret to say that our position is not helped by the fiasco that surrounded the release, after serving a fraction of their sentences, of the two British nurses convicted of the murder of their colleague, Yvonne Gilford, in Saudi Arabia. If my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister had asked my advice, I would have said that it was exceedingly unwise to intercede with King Fahd to try to secure the early release of those prisoners. The lucrative festival of crude anti-Muslim, anti-Arab racism in which sections of our media wallowed over those two women was entirely predictable and deeply offensive and damaging in itself.

Of course, we shall now be under considerable pressure to make the same type of intervention in Yemen—and already, with their courtroom outbursts about torture and even sexual abuse, the Yemen Eight are clearly not unmindful of the highly successful script first written on behalf of the Saudi Two. If we do not intervene, there are no prizes for guessing what charge will then be levelled against us; or for predicting that the whole affair will give a further twist to the alienation of so many in the Muslim community in our midst which is caused by the perceived racism, Islamophobia, discrimination and perceived double standards in British policy towards Muslim countries.

In the past three years, surveys conducted by the Runnymede Trust and other important surveys have amply demonstrated that anti-Muslim racism is a virulent and increasing issue in this country. It is not the province of bovver-booted skinhead lumpen thugs only. Indeed, it has been said that Islamophobia is the last "acceptable" form of racism, suitable for even the dinner tables of Islington and Hampstead.

Although in this short debate I do not want to over-dwell on the issue that the Minister and I have often debated—the conflict in the Gulf—it clearly cannot be separated from any review of the problems of relationships with the Muslim world.

Till the day I die, I will never understand what possessed the British Government to participate in the bombardment of an Arab capital city during the holy month of Ramadan. With all the centuries of collected wisdom, not least the once almost unique understanding of the Arab world within the British Foreign Office, how could it be that the devastating effects on Britain's standing in the region were not foreseen?

Early last year, with other parliamentary colleagues, I inspected the splendid work being done by the British Council in Damascus. By the end of the year, the premises were ruined, torn apart by the rage of the Syrian people at the outrage of the Ramadan attack. In Morocco, in Jordan, in Egypt, in Palestine and in Algeria, our flag burned with the stars and stripes, and was trampled underfoot in demonstrations that numbered, not hundreds of thousands, but millions of angry citizens.

It is no good pretending to public opinion in this country that we have support in the Arab world for the Anglo-American policy. It is no good for Ministers to state in the United Arab Emirates—where I was just yesterday—that the Government's policy towards Iraq is the same as the UAE's policy, "with slight differences". Well, as President Clinton might say, it depends on what one means by "slight". The UAE is completely against the bombing of Iraq; we are doing the bombing. The UAE is in favour of lifting the sanctions urgently; we are the strongest supporter of that sanctions policy.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Derek Fatchett) *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Galloway: The Minister shakes his head, but I discussed this matter with the leadership of the UAE at the weekend. For the benefit of the House, let me read

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the first and second declarations of the final communiqué of the Arab Foreign Ministers' meeting in Cairo last month. The quote is not a footnote, but declaration 1 and 2, which state:

"1. The Arab Ministers of Foreign Affairs express their deep objection to employing military force against Iraq which has resulted in many civilian casualties and demand that the use of diplomacy be the means of achieving compliance with UN resolutions . . .

2. They express their full support to the Iraqi people in their plight resulting from the sanctions imposed on it and stresses that every international effort must be made to lift these sanctions as soon as possible."

As my right hon. Friend may know, I have the benefit of watching Arabic television and closely following the Arabic media. I saw the interview with the Egyptian Foreign Minister, Amr Moussa, immediately following his meeting with my right hon. Friend, and he left the audience—I have the videotape—in no doubt of what he had told my right hon. Friend. The truth is—and my right hon. Friend knows it—that in the Muslim street, in the Arabic media, among the intelligentsia and in virtually every Arab capital, Britain's policy to bring about an end to the confrontation with Iraq is utterly rejected.

There is no use attempting to justify the unjustifiable by peddling outlandish propaganda hoaxes, as some have been doing in closed-door meetings of late. The Foreign Secretary twice told Labour audiences that a boy, now aged 16, had been in prison in Iraq since he was five years old, and that his crime had been to throw a stone at a portrait of the Iraqi president, Saddam Hussein. That is reminiscent of the product of a less sophisticated age, and harks back to the propaganda against "Kaiser Bill and the Hun" in the first world war.

I have asked the Foreign Secretary, and I ask the Foreign Office again now, publicly, to substantiate that story—to give me the name of the boy, the name of the prison and any other identifying details—and I will personally campaign for his immediate release. I hope that the Foreign Office will provide such substantiation, as it goes to the heart of the veracity of the Government's case.

I know, of course, that the Minister cannot say that he shares my views on many of these matters, but I shall advance some suggestions which, after due reflection, might appeal to my right hon. Friend rather more.

First, the Minister knows, and I know, and I know that he knows, that the bombing of the pharmaceuticals plant in Khartoum was a ghastly, terrible mistake. The plant was making not chemical weapons, but vitally needed medicines for one of the poorest countries in the world and one of our oldest Arab and Muslim friends. It was not a legitimate target for a massive hail of cruise missiles.

That is why the British Foreign Office has remained completely silent about the affair since the day that it happened. Indeed, many in the west have all but banished the memory of that crime from their mind, as though that will make it go away. It will not go away, and remains a cause of deep and abiding resentment in the Muslim world. The Government would do themselves a power of good if they could find a way clearly to dissociate themselves from the attack on Sudan.

Secondly, the Minister knows that I have had sharp political disagreements with the Government of Saudi Arabia and with their ambassador to the United Kingdom, Dr. Ghazi Alghosebi. Nevertheless, I believe that the Government should support the candidature of Dr. Alghosebi for the general secretaryship of UNESCO.

The ambassador is the candidate of all the Arab League countries and will have widespread support throughout the Muslim world. He is an outstanding intellectual, writer and poet, and is personally highly qualified for the post. If Britain used its vote and its influence in the Commonwealth and elsewhere in support of his candidature, again we would be sending an important and welcome message to the Muslims of the world.

Thirdly, the Foreign Office should constitute a working party or an ad hoc committee of the kind frequently spawned in relation to our position in Europe. Such a body should consider ways in which we might improve our position—which stands much imperilled—in the Muslim world.

Recently, I was in Paris, where I visited the Institute du Monde Arabe on the Seine overlooking Notre Dame. For me, it was an Aladdin's cave full of the wonders of the great Arab civilisation, its cultural richness, its food and literature, its films and music. The institute was full of people on a cold, wet Sunday in December. I began to wonder why we do not have an institute of the Arab world in this country, or in our case, an institute of the Muslim world, reflecting our much wider historical relationships.

Such an institute could, like the French one, be part-funded by the Government, by friendly Muslim Governments, by British business and by individual benefactors. It could play an important role in enhancing the British people's understanding of and respect for the Islamic world, and help to combat the alienation felt by the 2 million Muslims in our country.

The institute could be a bridge, linking east and west in trade as much as in education, and in culture as much as in politics. I believe that school and university students, foreign visitors and interested citizens, not least those in the ethnic minority populations, would find it a bridge to greater understanding and the avoidance of prejudice.

We have a longer and deeper history in the east than any other country in the occident. Notwithstanding recent and current events, there is still widespread admiration and affection for the people of this country among the Muslims of the world, but it is trickling away, and no longer slowly. I hate to see the bonds of those centuries burning in enmity. I hope that the Minister will give further consideration to the arguments that I have advanced.

12.44 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Derek Fatchett): My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Kelvin (Mr. Galloway) has raised a wide range of issues, to which I shall try to respond. He paints a vivid picture of the middle east. I was in the region last week, and I can tell my hon. Friend that I do not share that picture; nor was it a picture presented to me by those whom I had the opportunity to meet, both leaders and others. Clearly, we all travel differently and come to different conclusions. I do not share my hon. Friend's conclusion.

I share my hon. Friend's comments about the Saudi ambassador, who is an excellent representative of his country and, as my hon. Friend said, a well known poet and intellectual, who will be a strong candidate for the post of director of UNESCO.

My hon. Friend spoke of the attractions of establishing a Muslim institute in the United Kingdom. We are already blessed with one or two excellent bodies. Two weeks ago, I had the pleasure of visiting the Centre for Islamic Studies in Oxford, which has a worldwide reputation and attracts many Arab scholars. If we are not too myopic, we will recognise in the United Kingdom what is probably the world's leading institution for Islamic studies.

Yesterday, I had the pleasure—which may not yet have been brought to my hon. Friend's attention—of launching the exhibition, "Mutualities: Britain and Islam", which will run for the next six months as part of the visiting arts programme, and which brings Islamic art to the United Kingdom. My hon. Friend's suggestion has already been acted on. I can tell the House that he did not give me a copy of his speech in advance, and we therefore did not know that he would make the suggestion, but so influential is my hon. Friend at the Foreign Office that we launched the visiting arts Islamic programme a day before the debate.

I shall say a few words about Iraq, Yemen and our relations with United Kingdom Muslims and the Islamic world. On Iraq, there was a view, which I always held to be wrong, and which was expressed after Operation Desert Fox, that it would be impossible to create a new international consensus on Iraq, and that it would be impossible to deal with the disarmament issues because sanctions had to be lifted immediately.

Because of his travels, my hon. Friend may have failed to see the statement issued unanimously from the United Nations Security Council last Saturday, which dealt with all those issues. It shows that the Security Council is back in business, and that there is now a consensus covering the Arab representative on the Security Council, Russia, France, China, the United Kingdom and the United States. That consensus also extends to the Arab League statement. My hon. Friend should read the presidential statement, to which all 15 countries signed up.

There is a new consensus, and three panels have been established to deal with disarmament and monitoring, humanitarian issues, and outstanding issues relating to Kuwait. The best way that my hon. Friend could take forward the well-being of the people of Iraq would be to ask Saddam Hussein and those around Saddam Hussein in Baghdad to co-operate with the United Nations. That is what the Arab League Foreign Ministers are asking for. The United Nations—not just Britain, not just the United States, but France, China and Russia—are asking for such co-operation. It is a sine qua non of further progress. My hon. Friend would do the people of Iraq a great service if he sought that co-operation from the regime in Baghdad.

Mr. Galloway: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Fatchett: No, my hon. Friend has had 15 minutes.

My hon. Friend would also be serving the purpose if he pointed out that the way to remove sanctions, which is now accepted by the Arab League and by the Security Council unanimously, is through Iraq's co-operation. The Arab League statement and the Security Council statement said that the body of law that relates to Iraq is from the Security Council resolutions. There must be co-operation. There must be compliance. Sanctions cannot be lifted without that.

Mr. Galloway: On that—

Mr. Fatchett: No, no, I cannot give way in a short debate.

On disarmament, there were those who said that the disarmament phase was finished in Iraq, and that there would be no further role for UNSCOM or for the International Atomic Energy Agency. Again, I suggest that hon. Members read the presidential statement. There is to be a role in the panel for UNSCOM and for the International Atomic Energy Agency.

I congratulate Jeremy Greenstock and his colleagues in the United Nations, and I pay tribute to all the work that has been done by the Foreign Office. That work has enabled us to build a new consensus, with which we are comfortable and which takes forward the issues of Iraq. We must put the onus on Baghdad: if Baghdad co-operates, there will be light at the end of the tunnel. Baghdad must listen not just to the Security Council but to its neighbours who are saying that co-operation is essential.

My hon. Friend criticised my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary. It is interesting to note that, in all his comments about Iraq, my hon. Friend did not refer to the missing Kuwaiti prisoners of war. He did not refer to Iraq's systematic human rights violations or to the Kurds who were killed, injured and maimed by exposure to chemical weapons. He did not mention how the Shia people of southern Iraq were the victims of torture and suffered death and injury at the hands of Saddam Hussein.

I shall relate for my hon. Friend a stark personal experience that I had last year. I regularly meet displaced Iraqis and, 12 months ago, I met at the Foreign Office a young Kurd who was the victim of chemical weapons. He told me privately that his health was so bad that he probably had only a short time to live. That was because, during his teenage years, he had been exposed to chemical weapons. That young man may not be alive today. When talking about Iraq, I hope that my hon. Friend will not forget that young man and the many tens of thousands of young men just like him.

There is a strong moral argument for acting, as we and the international community have sought to do over the years, to disarm Iraq and make it less of a threat to regional security and to its own people. I am confident that we have taken the right decisions and the moral ones. The best possible course of action for us all—whatever we might think about the short-term tactical issues—is to ensure that Iraq is given the green light to co-operate because, without co-operation, there can be no progress.

My hon. Friend mentioned Yemen and, characteristically, seems to have reached his own conclusions although the legal process has hardly begun. That is not—and cannot be—the position of the British Foreign Office. We will always—in Yemen or in any other circumstances—treat equally all those with British citizenship. We have a consular responsibility, which we will carry out. If my hon. Friend puts down a written parliamentary question on the subject, I shall set out the chronology of events in relation to the five men in Yemen and the action that the Foreign Office has taken. We have

[Mr. Fatchett]

sought to meet our responsibilities to those five individuals: we have tried to ensure that they have a fair trial and access to lawyers and consular staff. That is the action that we would normally take in similar circumstances.

While I serve as a Foreign Office Minister, I shall ensure that the consular service of the British Foreign Office works equally for every British citizen, regardless of colour, religion or background. That is what has occurred in this case, and I give a clear commitment that it will continue. We will not make judgments about people's guilt: people deserve a fair trial. We will not make judgments about any British citizens who are involved in a legal process. That is not our task; neither is it our task to represent British citizens in court. However, we must ensure that each and every British citizen has the same rights.

I take very seriously the issues to which my hon. Friend referred. I am the first Foreign Office Minister to initiate regular meetings with representatives of the United Kingdom Muslim community. I met them yesterday and heard a wide range of Muslim opinion. We meet once every two or three months, and the meetings are developing in an interesting direction. I am delighted that we can meet and that I can hear about the foreign affairs interests of the Muslim community. Yesterday we talked about Kosovo—in which the Muslim community has a real and genuine interest—Yemen and a little about Iraq. However, Kosovo and Yemen were the main issues of discussion during our two-hour meeting.

I seek openness and something more than that: I want the British Foreign Office to reflect Britain; recruitment to the Foreign Office must reflect a modern Britain. Members of the Muslim faith must have every opportunity of being recruited to the Foreign Office and of progressing their careers within that Department. I look forward to the day when someone of the Muslim faith emerges, on merit, from the staff of the Foreign Office who is capable of representing Britain as an ambassador overseas. We have opened the door to the Muslim community, and we look forward to those changes.

It is known widely in the middle east that I am determined to avoid giving any credence to the argument that there will be an inevitable clash of civilisations: a challenge between Christianity and Islam. I have always regarded that as dangerous and incredibly sloppy thinking, which fails to recognise the great divisions within Christianity and Islam. It is immensely dangerous to believe that Christianity versus Islam must replace the great cold war crusade of capitalism versus communism. We must avoid that trap. That is why, in my discussions in the middle east, I have told leaders that we must open a dialogue about Christian and Islamic values that recognises the interaction between civilisations and is sensitive to each set of beliefs and values.

We can do much more in that regard. That is one of the reasons why, during our European Union presidency, we called for regular meetings between the EU and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference. Such meetings might be governed by a very formal agenda, but it is one way of bringing together people of different faiths from different backgrounds who may have different agendas. We are keen to advance that process. However, I give a clear commitment to my hon. Friend that, when it comes to the standing and the status of Islam in the world, I shall always be on the side of those who seek to ensure that those beliefs are granted true legitimacy. We simply do not subscribe to the notion that Islam is a force for evil.

Furthermore, I wholly object to the labelling and stereotyping with regard to Islam that is often the product of lazy journalism. The British media often refer to "Muslim terrorists" but do not apply the same sort of labels to terrorists from other faiths. That sort of labelling must be stopped. We need to look at people in the round, taking account of their values and faiths.

I am delighted that my hon. Friend has provided this positive opportunity to talk about the activities of the Foreign Office and the way in which it is working with the Muslim world. My hon. Friend did not mention one possible forthcoming event of significance to the Muslim world. I hope that this year Indonesia will become a democracy comprising 200 million people, mostly of the Muslim faith. That will be a tremendous change and advance in the world.

My hon. Friend always paints a vivid picture—his school of art and his school of rhetoric are very close. Although I often admire his brushwork, I think that his concern with detail is not as good as his broader strokes. I do not recognise the picture that he painted of Britain's relations with the Arab world.

Elderly (West Sussex)

12.59 pm

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): In West Sussex we know something about the elderly, and we certainly value them. In 1996, 171,000 people out of a total county population of 727,000 were over pensionable age. That is 23.6 per cent.—almost a quarter—against 18.2 per cent. for the country as a whole. It is forecast that by 2016—twenty years on—that gap will have widened and more than 27 per cent. of the population of West Sussex will be of pensionable age against the national average of 21 per cent.

The constituencies on the coastal strip, which are represented by my hon. Friends who are in the Chamber today, all feature in the top 27 constituencies with the highest number of pensionable age residents. Top is Worthing, West with 42.6 per cent.; ninth is Bognor Regis and Littlehampton with 36.8 per cent.; Chichester is 17th with 33.2 per cent.; and my constituency of Worthing, East and Shoreham is 27th with 32 per cent.—almost a third—of residents of pensionable age.

Worthing borough has the highest number of pensioners in the entire country, but it is forecast that we will be overtaken by Clacton-on-Sea in 2000. Although the average age of people in Worthing is decreasing, we have twice the number of over-65s, and three times the number of over-85s, compared with the national average. Nationally, the number of over-85s is forecast to double to 2.2 million by 2040. That will impact on us most of all.

There is net immigration into West Sussex, which we welcome; it is a nice place to live, and also to die. Part of the character of Sussex is represented by its elderly population. None of us in the Chamber would want it any other way, but, contrary to popular myth, not everyone in Sussex—and on the coastal strip, in particular—lives in a castle. There are many areas of deprivation.

Under the index of local deprivation drawn up for judging single regeneration budget challenge fund criteria, Central ward in Worthing, for example, was ranked among the 10 per cent. of wards in England that are most deprived. Areas of Adur, in my constituency, suffer high unemployment, which leads to poorer pensioners living in rented accommodation. The same is true in parts of Littlehampton, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb).

The high preponderance of elderly people in our county means that very great demands are placed on the health budget and on social services spending, which is what I want to discuss today. The national health service survey produced by *The Times* last November revealed that West Sussex has the longest delays for hospital treatment in the whole of England: one patient in seven on the waiting list—14.9 per cent. of that list—waits for more than a year for hospital treatment. Lambeth is next, with 12.7 per cent.

At the opposite end of the scale, northern authorities such as Sunderland and Northumberland have less than 0.5 per cent. of patients on waiting lists waiting for over a year. There are 30 times more patients waiting over a year on West Sussex waiting lists than on those of the best performing hospitals in England.

Only West Sussex last year recorded a bigger rise in the number of patients waiting for over a year. The figure increased from 902 to 3,634, which is a very large increase. Typically some of the longest lists are for age-related operations, such as hip replacements and cataract operations. Problems are widespread, extending particularly to mental health. There is a dire shortage of acute mental health beds.

It is no surprise that the largest branch of the Alzheimer's Disease Society is in Worthing. The priority care trust responsible for those services has overspent by £550,000, with two months of the financial year to go, despite having made savings of £450,000 already. For the first time ever, it will not be able to balance its books. Worthing also has the largest branch of the Parkinson's Disease Society, and I pay tribute to the work that it has done.

West Sussex health authority overall is £5.5 million over budget, despite the best efforts of all its staff. We are desperately trying to reduce the waiting lists, but Worthing and Southlands Hospitals NHS trust, for example, has 90 nurse vacancies and a severe problem with nurse recruitment. A high level of emergency admissions compounds that problem.

We need special help for special age-related problems, but, despite the extra money last year, our funding remains under capitation. The health authority is the worst funded in the whole of the South Thames region, after the accumulation of years of being funded well below capitation. Now we are threatened with unbearable pressure to reduce waiting lists by the end of March. For example, if Worthing and Southlands Hospitals NHS trust does not reduce its waiting list from 7,500 to a target of 5,000, it will be penalised to the tune of £450 for each patient over that target figure at the end of March. The largest reduction target for any hospital in the country has been given to Worthing and Southlands. It is trying its best, but it will be hard pressed to meet the target.

In social services, the county council has radically overhauled its policy towards care for the elderly. Shortage of funds has regrettably forced the closure of four residential homes in the county, two of which were in my constituency, but at least the funds raised are being recycled into the social services budget, with significant reinvestment in preventive home care. That will enable more people to be looked after in their own homes, but other schemes cannot be funded because of the shortfall. I pay tribute to the sensitive way in which West Sussex county council social services department has handled those closures, which have been forced upon it.

An increasing number of elderly people are looking for residential or nursing care in our county. There are 5,000 nursing home beds in West Sussex, which is 0.64 per cent. per head of the population compared with a national average of only 0.3 per cent. Again, the figure is double. The problem is worsening. A man aged 65 has a 9 per cent. probability of requiring residential care for the rest of his life, or a 5 per cent. probability of requiring nursing home care. The figures for a woman aged 65 are 13 and 37 per cent.

Given that Worthing has almost twice as many women as men over the age of 60, the problem is compounded in our part of the world. It is a particular problem with the increasing number of people who enter care paying for themselves, but who become a demand on local authorities when their capital falls below £16,000. In the past eight months 140 people, no less, have moved from being self-funded to being supported by public funds.

[Mr. Tim Loughton]

The cost to the county, so far, has been £700,000, which is a sizeable sum. On present trends, that will increase to £1.6 million in the next year.

We therefore have problems with bed blocking. Currently, 32 elderly people are waiting for placements in residential and nursing home care, 28 of whom are in hospital at a time when there are virtually no available beds in our hospitals. Social services wants to help to reduce bed blocking, but it is caught in a Catch-22 situation. We need special help for special age-related problems.

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): Does my hon. Friend agree that, faced with those problems—and although the social services department has an excellent record—it is monstrous that the gerrymandering of the standard spending assessment funding has resulted in a 10.4 per cent. cut in the social security budget this year, notwithstanding a 7.4 per cent. increase in council tax? Does he deplore what has happened? We were given the lowest award in the whole country and the special transitional grant was not phased into the SSA rollover.

Mr. Loughton: My hon. Friend anticipates the point that I was coming to. We have said that we need special help for special age-related problems, but West Sussex received the lowest Government grant of any shire county in England recently. There was, on the face of it, an increase of 3.8 per cent., against an average of 5.2 per cent., but, as my hon. Friend said, after adjustments for community care funding, nursery voucher abolition and discretionary arrangements, the increase was only 2.2 per cent.

The social services figure is even worse; it suffered a reduction of £4.7 million after adjusting for last year's special transitional grant, which is not to be rolled forward. That is the 10th-lowest increase of all 150 councils in the country and, again, the lowest of all shire counties.

The additional £1.7 million for West Sussex announced only two days ago—it is amazing what an imminent Adjournment debate can achieve—is a small improvement, but it comes at the same time as the teachers' pay award and other new responsibilities for local authorities. It is a drop in the ocean in terms of the deficit on social services alone. Incredibly, the number of people in residential care has been excluded from the calculation of funding needs for people in residential care. Therefore, funding does not take account of people moving into residential care in West Sussex from other areas of the country.

Under Labour's first local government settlement, West Sussex social services had to make savings of £2.5 million, which is almost as much as the total savings for the previous four years put together. It is often assumed that wealthy West Sussex is a soft touch for large increases in charges. However, as the joint review by the Social Services Inspectorate and the Audit Commission observed:

> "Charges already represent a substantial proportion of gross expenditure and the scope for greatly increasing income seems limited."

So the nearly poor are paying for the really poor. It is little wonder that the recent settlement was condemned in West Sussex, by all parties, as grotesque and devastating.

Other Government changes have compounded the problem. The abolition of tax relief on private medical insurance in Labour's first Budget has particularly affected Worthing, which has the highest number of pensioners with such policies. That has undoubtedly led to an increase in waiting lists.

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): My hon. Friend explains very well the difficulties faced by the elderly in West Sussex. Is he aware that retired people will suffer severely from the array of stealth taxes introduced by the Government? They will pay £95 a year extra because of the reduction in the value of the married couples' allowance, £50 a year more because of extra duties on petrol, and an additional £75 a year because of the abolition of the repayment of dividend tax credits.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): Further to the intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb), I have received many letters making exactly that point. It is clear that many people in my constituency who are on modest incomes have been hit by the decision to abolish ACT dividend tax credit. The 1997 Budget was disastrous for them. Does my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) have the same experience in his constituency?

Mr. Loughton: I completely agree with the points made by my two hon. Friends. The abolition of dividend tax credits will affect more than 300,000 people nationally. Many of my constituents are the typical victims of that measure. Those people may have just a few shares. They may, on the face of it, be asset rich in that they own their own home and a few shares from privatisations or building society demutualisations, but they are income poor, and to take away a large chunk of that income exacerbates their poverty. Despite the Paymaster General's assurances that there are alternatives, there are none for those people.

Honest attempts by poorer pensioners in West Sussex to save in retirement and for their retirement to enable them to stand on their own two feet have, through recent stealth tax changes, been dealt a blow by an intransigent Government.

Many people in West Sussex may be forgiven for thinking that the Government are Sussexist. I should like to pay tribute to hospital and social services staff across the county for the excellent job they are doing in difficult circumstances. I also pay tribute to our county council staff for their sensitivity in handling these appalling settlements. When West Sussex suffers, our poorer pensioners, in abundance, bear the brunt. I ask the Government to give proper recognition to the very real and growing funding problems that go with having such a high population of pensioners in our county.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West) *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. I am sorry, I cannot call the hon. Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley). He has not intimated that he wishes to speak.

Mr. Bottomley: If I have done wrong, I apologise. My impression was that, if one stood up during the debate,

one had the opportunity to be called, if the Minister and the hon. Member who had secured the debate would allow.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Does the hon. Gentleman have the Minister's permission to speak in the debate?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Hutton): Yes, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

1.14 pm

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) on his initiative. I hope that the Minister and his colleagues will agree to meet a deputation from the organisations that are concerned with the illnesses and circumstances of the elderly. We know that we cannot change the rate support grant settlement for this year, although the extra £1 million is welcome. If, in the years to come, we face the prospect of more and more money being taken away from social services and less and less money being available as increases for the health services, people with Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease and others will be hurt.

In praise of Government Departments and people in West Sussex, I should like to refer to a letter that I received today from a mentally ill constituent, who says that the voluntary and statutory services have combined to give him a fuller life than he had elsewhere. We should like to receive such tributes more often, but to provide such services requires resources.

1.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Hutton): I congratulate the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) on securing this important debate. I welcome the tribute that he paid to NHS and local authority staff in West Sussex. I am aware that a high proportion of older people live in West Sussex, especially in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and the surrounding area. That has an impact on social care and local health services, and I welcome the opportunity to discuss the way in which our policies and our positive agenda will improve vital services in the hon. Gentleman's constituency.

Older people make an enormous contribution to our national life, and the Government are determined to ensure that their wishes and needs are taken seriously. We also intend to ensure that older people are valued properly and can play their full part in society as a whole.

The hon. Gentleman has raised some specific issues, and I shall try to address as many as possible in the time available. He referred to mental health pressures in his constituency, but he conveniently forgot to mention the Government's "Modernising Mental Health Services" strategy document, which we published in December. On top of the initial spending that we have allocated to mental health services in Britain, we are making a further £700 million available to support modern mental health services in England. Within that strategy, we have recognised the need for extra beds in the acute sector, throughout the service into the community and in the high-security forensic services. If the hon. Gentleman has time, he should look at our strategy document, and he may draw some satisfaction from it.

The hon. Gentleman also referred to nursing shortages. I am sure that he welcomes the excellent news—which the Secretary of State gave at Health questions yesterday—that nurses not currently working in the NHS have shown significant interest in returning to employment within the NHS. That is a positive response to our advertising campaign. Given that response and the nurses' pay award, we are confident that we shall begin to address the problem of nursing shortages in the short and medium term.

In a thoughtful part of his speech, the hon. Gentleman rightly referred to the charging regime for long-term residential care. That is a fundamentally important issue, and in our White Paper, "Modernising Social Services"—I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman has had an opportunity to read it—we said that we were determined to introduce greater consistency in the charging regimes across local authorities. Given that the royal commission on long-term care is currently examining this issue, it would be appropriate to wait until it makes its recommendations, so that we can have a proper debate about charging policies for domiciliary care and charging regimes for residential care.

I should point out, however, that we inherited the regime that the hon. Gentleman is now criticising and complaining about from the Government he strongly supported. Some of the problems he highlighted did not start on 1 May 1997. We inherited a range of problems with which we are seriously trying to get to grips.

Mr. Tyrie: The Government are making matters worse.

Mr. Hutton: No, we are not making them worse. We are trying to get to grips with the problems in the NHS and in social services. By providing record levels of spending, we are ensuring that those two services receive more resources than they ever received during the 18 years when the hon. Gentleman's party had responsibility.

The hon. Gentleman referred to winter pressures. I am grateful to him for praising NHS staff on their efforts to tackle the acute pressures that the service came under over the winter holiday period. A huge effort was made in West Sussex to ensure that everyone received the necessary treatment and care. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will join me in congratulating the staff again. A huge amount of collaborative work has been done across health and social care to ensure effective service planning, commissioning assessment and delivery of services to the people in West Sussex.

That effort has paid particular dividends this winter, despite a sharp increase in the levels of illness, especially for older people, which resulted in a huge increase in the number of patients using the NHS. It was better prepared than ever before to cope with those illnesses, and in most places, including across West Sussex—despite what the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham said—most hospitals have coped well with the pressures.

Mr. Loughton: I am interested in the general points that the Minister is making, but he has not addressed the fact that West Sussex has effectively had a £4.7 million cut in its social services budget and West Sussex health authority has by far the longest waiting lists of any health authority in the country, with one in seven of our people

[Mr. Loughton]

waiting for more than a year. That does not sound like a good modernising deal for my constituents in West Sussex.

Mr. Hutton: I will address the hon. Gentleman's points in the course of my remarks, but I have only just started to try to do so. As he will know, 2,200 schemes are under way nationally. Of those, we have supported 28 schemes in West Sussex, with the help of an additional £1 million from the resources which the Government made available before Christmas. Those schemes include £70,000 for a project in the hon. Gentleman's constituency of Worthing to reduce medical and acute admissions for the elderly; £31,000 for rehabilitation to be provided in residential establishments; and more than £100,000 to fund a medical assessment area, thus preventing admissions to main wards.

The additional money has helped, but we have not stopped there. From the £50 million contingency fund announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health last month, we have provided another £500,000 to support 15 new schemes in West Sussex, including £75,000 for a joint collaboration with social services for a nursing home discharge scheme in Mid Sussex; £20,000, again in Worthing, for the provision of three non-NHS beds at a local rest home to facilitate early discharge; and £10,000 to provide additional elderly care consultant sessions at the Queen Victoria hospital.

We have encouraged health authorities to support joint schemes such as those that I have outlined. Indeed, the local health authority has provided support to West Sussex social services by transferring funds through section 28A of the National Health Service Act 1977, which, as the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham will be aware, has long been a key funding mechanism, also used by the previous Administration, to enable health authorities to support the work of social services. Significant resources have been transferred to assist that process.

This winter we also extended flu vaccinations to all those over 75, rather than confining vaccinations to particularly vulnerable groups. As a result, nationally a third of a million extra doses have been given this year compared with last, and the vaccine remains available. I am sure that many older people in West Sussex have taken advantage of that initiative, and they will have had the opportunity to benefit from the many other initiatives recently announced, including the national lottery new opportunities fund; the renewal of a quarter of accident and emergency departments across the country; and NHS Direct.

Mr. Tyrie: What about the cuts?

Mr. Hutton: The hon. Gentleman who seeks to intervene from a sedentary position got into trouble recently because he made inappropriate remarks to other hon. Members.

Mr. Gibb: I did not say a word and I hope that the Minister will apologise.

Mr. Hutton: I shall not apologise to the hon. Gentleman. Someone on the Opposition Benches is muttering very rudely and inappropriately. It may be worth reminding Conservative Members that Adjournment debates are usually an opportunity for a proper and friendly exchange of views. I am trying to do that and it is a great shame that Conservative Members seem to have lost their manners.

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham mentioned the rise in waiting lists and times in his and other constituencies in West Sussex. We are aware of the problems, especially in the orthopaedic service, but those problems did not start on 1 May 1997. I am assured that the hospital to which the hon. Gentleman referred, the Worthing and Southlands NHS trust, is aiming to meet its target for waiting list reductions by the end of March.

The rise in waiting lists and times in West Sussex were as much a consequence of historical financial pressures as of the increasing need for treatment by patients. We are putting that right by investing more in West Sussex. In 1998-99, we invested an additional £6.3 million, which was the largest real terms increase in the then South Thames region. That is not the picture that the hon. Gentleman presented. From the first stage of our £21 billion extra investment, in 1999–2000 the health authority will receive nearly 4 per cent. real growth in funding of some £16 million.

Mr. Loughton: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hutton: No, I will not. We are therefore delivering our promises to the people of West Sussex, both with this additional money and also our firm commitment to reduce waiting lists overall. We have provided extra money and we will deliver on our commitment. Nationally, the waiting lists reduced by 136,000, or nearly 10.5 per cent., between April and November 1998.

In West Sussex we have set very demanding targets—some of the most demanding in the whole of England. To their credit, the health authority and the local trusts are getting on with it and have been able to reduce the waiting lists by nearly 4,000 since March 1998. I understand that the health authority is aiming to reduce the waiting lists by just under 28 per cent., or nearly 7,000 patients, before the end of the year. That substantial programme of work includes treating a great many more patients, including treatments targeted mainly at older people, such as those for cataracts.

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham mentioned problems with cataract surgery. He might be interested to learn that if the figures for the first six months of last year are compared with those for this year, they show that more than 450 more cataract operations have been performed for West Sussex residents. That is a positive and encouraging step.

I know that the West Sussex health authority is keen to reduce waiting lists even further in the next financial year, especially in targeting in-patients, and is currently discussing that with the south-east regional office of the NHS Executive.

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham mentioned the situation of the local authority in West Sussex. The hon. Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) asked whether I would be prepared to meet a delegation. I am always happy to talk to hon. Members about issues to do with social services or the NHS that are my responsibility. If the hon. Member for

East Worthing and Shoreham and his hon. Friends wish to arrange such a meeting, I would be more than happy to try to accommodate them.

I shall comment briefly on the pressures on social services in West Sussex. Resources nationally for social services are increasing by 6.1 per cent. next year, significantly above the rate of inflation. We are targeting a large proportion of that increase at improving the services for older people through better planning and delivery of services across the interface between the health service and social services, and in particular through improved rehabilitation services. I accept that the increase in resources for personal social services in West Sussex will be less than many other local authorities will receive. That is a result of changes to the formula used to allocate national resources for both children's and elderly services between local authorities. Those changes were made as a result of detailed independent academic research and have been fully discussed with all our partners in local government. We now have in place a much fairer and more equitable distribution system.

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham referred specifically to the problems with institutional care and excluding people in residential care from the standard spending assessment formula. If the SSA calculation reflected the total number of people in institutional care in an area, it would risk giving SSA credit to the wrong authority. Some of the people publicly supported in care in West Sussex are probably not that authority's financial responsibility, because they have been placed in those homes by other boroughs, perhaps from outside Sussex. It is therefore fairer to take no account of the numbers in care, because that does not properly reflect the needs of the population.

Mr. Tyrie: Before the Minister concludes, can he give some comfort for the future and confirm that the proportionate cuts in West Sussex county council's budget will be reversed, so that we can tell our constituents this weekend that there is some hope that the Government will reconsider the issue?

Mr. Hutton: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the ink is not yet dry on the local government financial settlement. Further announcements are due on the subject and he may draw some satisfaction from them.

Unfortunately, we are running out of time for this debate. The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham raised other points that I would have liked to address, and I shall correspond with him about them. We want first-class services for the people who use the NHS and we want the best possible social services that we can provide for people in Britain. That is the whole purpose of our modernisation agenda for the NHS and social services and that applies just as much to the hon. Gentleman's constituents in West Sussex as it does to anyone else in the country.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I did not raise the point during the Minister's speech because he was being conciliatory and we wanted to hear what he had to say, but the voices he heard did not come from here. If the problem recurs, you have the ability to refer the matter to the Royal College of Psychiatrists.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That is not a matter for the Chair.

Chemical Engineering Education

1.29 pm

Dr. Ashok Kumar (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East): I declare an interest in that I am by qualification and profession a chemical engineer. I was a practising engineer before entering the House. I want to highlight the point that the Government's goal of a modern, competitive industrial nation must be underpinned by competent, well-educated chemical engineers. This week's headline in *The Engineer* says, "UK students reject Engineering"; they are rejecting it in masses.

I am not alone in recognising the importance of chemical engineering and chemical engineers to our standards of life. The Prime Minister recognised the vital role of chemical engineers in developing and implementing United Kingdom technology in his personal foreward to the recent Institution of Chemical Engineers report "Future Life".

In the global market, the UK has to compete on many fronts. The old certainties and practices that sustained us in the past cannot be called on in the global context of constant technological innovation and emerging markets. However, the UK still possesses poles of industrial strength and expertise inherited from the days when we were dominant. Nowhere is that more true than in the chemical industry. It was the last of the great staple industries to be developed, with names such as ICI and British Petroleum known across the globe. It is still a powerhouse of innovation, applied science and the development of new products.

Chemical engineers work not only in the traditional chemical industry, but wherever chemical reactions and processes are part of the manufacturing chain. That includes the water and energy industries, pharmaceuticals, and food and drink. That roll call shows the need for chemical engineers, whose work affects us all. They clothe us, their drugs heal us, they help to feed us and they furnish our homes and offices. They intimately affect all aspects of our living environment. From fertilisers to plastics, the chemical engineering industry has been a leading producer and developer of new materials for daily life. That is reflected in the markets.

In the UK, the basic chemical engineering industry has a yearly turnover of some £20 billion, making up 1.7 per cent. of our total gross domestic product. If we assess the added value of finished products, that figure can be quintupled. There are also links to process engineering and contracting, which is one of the UK's less-well-known strengths. That is why major multinational contractors such as Kvaerner, Foster Wheeler, Kellogg, Brown and Root and AMEC have UK headquarters, helping the UK and our balance of payments.

The strategic importance of the UK chemical industry must not be underestimated. The key issue is developing our human potential. Unlike other, older industries, our chemical industry is not a technological cul-de-sac. The constant search for new products, the growth of biosciences, the constant drive to harness natural processes to human benefit, and pioneering work, such as molecular technology, at the frontiers of knowledge, need a flow of dedicated, imaginative, young people who can think laterally, if we are to compete on equal terms with other nations.

[Dr. Ashok Kumar]

The jobs are there. A recent Department of Trade and Industry study showed that there will be continuing demand for high-quality engineering graduates over the coming decade. Chemical engineering students and graduates are often the people who enter higher education with the best A-level scores. While that is a source of pride, it hides the fact that, for many young people, chemical engineering is culturally unattractive. I believe that that stems from environmental concerns that equate the chemical industry with environmental degradation and pollution, and, mentally, with Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory. Nothing could be more wrong.

We live with the environmental consequences of our industrial past. As a Teesside Member, I see that every day, but chemical engineers will be at the cutting edge in the fight to clean up our planet. They are the people who will have to devise and apply environmental techniques. That point should be hammered home at an early age. The chemical industry has long fostered good relationships with schools and colleges. It is important that this is built into the national curriculum for science by demonstrating the links between the things that we all want from society, the market and the work of chemical engineers. New courses dealing with food and drink, agriculture, biosciences and advanced manufacturing must be developed. The courses must set practical, rather than rhetorical, questions about the environment, and demand responses that encourage and develop recycling and reprocessing techniques.

We must also tackle the gender gap in the science classroom. Anecdotally, I am told that the number of young women expressing interest in science courses and allied GCSE paths is very low. Interestingly, the highest proportion of young women graduate engineers are chemical engineers. Gender imbalances are not healthy for our society wherever they occur. We must ensure that broad-based science teaching is as women-friendly as possible.

The key is to get more youngsters involved in science early. The basic problem is revealed by one simple fact. For every 100 five-year-olds who enter a classroom for the first time, only 20 go on to do an A-level. Of them, only 10 go on to study science and technology in higher or advanced education. The percentage of those going on to study chemical engineering is smaller still.

Innovations in the classroom and school laboratory must be matched by innovation in the university seminar room. The steady stream of bright new engineers from our universities finds well-paid jobs. Chemical engineers can command average earnings comparable with or better than those of solicitors, chartered accountants and architects. That is countered by lower salaries and expectations among the academic staff who train these high fliers. The recent Bett committee report painted a gloomy picture of the state of chemical engineering in higher education and the salaries enjoyed there. It found that many university staff were underpaid and overworked. Comparable jobs in the private sector were better paid and often more attractive in research terms. The ever-increasing strain of handling routine administration was also taking a toll.

The logical answer is to ensure that greater esteem is granted to chemical engineering in the university environment. One simple way to do that would be to review the salary structure. The holy cow of all staff being paid on a single national scale for lecturers and senior lecturers irrespective of discipline must be queried. It does not stand to up to the presence of a competitive market outside the walls of the college or university. A precedent was set by the fact that the medical professions have accepted special pay scales in teaching institutions for clinical specialisms.

The growing shortage of chemical engineering lecturers is demonstrated by a study by the Institution of Chemical Engineers, which showed that of a cohort of 1,500 graduates with firsts or upper seconds over the past 13 years from the five leading UK universities with chemical engineering departments, only seven had gone on to take tenured teaching positions in the UK. Bluntly, we must develop better links between the industry and the universities, and, within universities, between chemistry and chemical engineering departments, as advocated by the Royal Society of Chemistry.

There are good examples of companies such as ICI, Zeneca and Esso sponsoring lecturing positions where salaries are supplemented financially, but the links need to be made at research level. Industry needs more research facilities and should be prepared to pay for them through direct cash sponsorship and by setting up joint research ventures. What research needs to be done, how it is to be conducted and who will pay for it are questions with which both universities and industry must grapple.

While the quality of chemical engineering research and the people engaged in it have been assessed by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council as being fully competitive when compared with other major engineering disciplines, there are signs that that competitiveness is beginning to flag. The official data prepared by the Government's chief scientist Sir Robert May show that the citations in chemical engineering of United Kingdom research workers are falling behind those of researchers in competitor countries.

In recent years, a mismatch has begun to emerge between the strength of the current UK chemical engineering research base, and multidisciplinary and inter-disciplinary areas of interest as exemplified by the foresight programme and the "Future Life" document produced by the Institution of Chemical Engineers. That mismatch needs to be rectified if we are to meet the new challenges and changes in our industrial structure, as the chemical industry restructures around high value-added speciality products and increasingly deserts its old heavy petrochemical base.

Alarmingly, the changes come when the latest Universities and Colleges Admission Service figures show that applications for chemical engineering places are still in decline, with a 10 per cent. drop in the current year. That decline affects all engineering disciplines, but it is a special problem for the chemical engineering profession, as structural changes are occurring in the industries which will require a stream of new graduates.

We have to make chemical engineering more relevant to young people who are considering their careers. In the House, we debate issues of great importance. Often, they are issues that can be resolved and informed only by the work of engineers: how best to bring degraded land back into beneficial use; what are the real issues and the real levels of risk in the genetic modification of foods, which we discussed earlier; what is the best route for effective

recycling of wastes and materials; and how to produce the materials of the 21st century. All those are matters that, if properly studied in our universities, would help both to inform policy makers and to train a new generation of scientists and engineers in problem-solving techniques. Also, the industries that participated in those programmes would receive a real boost.

However, industry also has to realise that participation entails recognising that universities are autonomous bodies with a prime mission to turn out fully rounded and dedicated graduates. That should not deter industry. The needs of industry and the work of higher education are, in the final analysis, totally synergic.

If the UK chemical industry genuinely wants to increase efficiency and productivity, put clear blue water between themselves and their competitors, and make the quantum leap into the development of the technologies of the coming millennium, it must be prepared to contribute to research, and to constant career enhancement and retraining.

I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to study closely the decline in the public funds available for biochemical engineering, which is one of the key forward areas of chemical engineering. I recognise that there is no such thing as a free meal. Society and the House must recognise that we need to consider how best to resource the work of higher education in that area of expertise. Industry, too, must recognise that long-term growth cannot come merely from leeching off research work that is financed and conducted by others. It must recognise its obligations to help that process.

As a Teesside Member of Parliament representing perhaps the one area of the UK where the chemical industry is the cornerstone of the local economy, and as a chemical engineer, I am aware of the absolute dependence of modern society on chemical engineering. It is time to recognise that dependence and to plan for its proper development. Attracting more of the brightest and best from our schools into science and engineering courses is imperative for all of us. While the national curriculum delivers science for every youngster until the age of 16, it has not led to greater participation in science A-levels or higher entry figures to our universities. That is something which the Department for Education and Employment and the Department of Trade and Industry must tackle, directly and quickly.

My hon. Friend the Minister must recognise that we need to tackle the imbalance of courses in our universities. Some subjects are over-subscribed—some people may feel that they contribute to national renewal—while in others, standards have to be dropped merely to fill the places.

In conclusion, the work of our chemical engineers is fundamental to the comfort of our daily life, and to the development of an economic and industrial base that will power the nation into a technologically exciting new century. That work is crucial if this nation is to remain in the front rank of industrial countries and to possess an independent economy. The quality of life of our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren demands nothing less. Thank you for allowing this debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Dr. Michael Clark (Rayleigh) *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. During Adjournment debates, any hon. Member who wants to take part must have the prior permission of the Minister and the promoter of the debate.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. George Mudie): I am happy to allow the hon. Gentleman to speak, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

1.45 pm

Dr. Michael Clark (Rayleigh): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I also thank the Minister. I will only take one minute, as I am encroaching on the hon. Gentleman's time. I congratulate the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East (Dr. Kumar) on securing this debate and on the way in which he has presented it. The hon. Gentleman serves on the Select Committee on Science and Technology. He brings his skill and expertise in chemical engineering into that Committee and is an invaluable member of it. When I worked as a chemical engineer, I did so in his constituency, and I do not need reminding of the importance of chemical engineers, although I welcomed the opportunity to hear the concise way in which the importance of that profession was put before the House.

I will bear in mind my promise to speak for only one minute. I have made my main points, and I again thank the Minister and the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East for allowing me to do so.

1.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. George Mudie): I thank the hon. Member for Rayleigh (Dr. Clark) for those kind remarks about my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East (Dr. Kumar). He has done the House a service by raising this important issue. Indeed, I believe that this is the first time that chemical as opposed to general engineering has been discussed on the Floor of the House. As my hon. Friend was a chemical engineer before he entered the House, he is uniquely placed to comment on that important sector of the United Kingdom economy. His constituency in Teesside contains the largest concentration of the chemical industry in the UK, which adds to the authority with which he speaks.

Chemical engineers have an important impact in virtually all areas of life, being found in industries as diverse as oil refining and health care. The contribution that they can make to developing an economically viable, but environmentally more friendly world is clearly set out in the thought-provoking "Future Life" report, which was produced by the Institution of Chemical Engineers, to which my hon. Friend referred.

"Future Life" identifies a host of challenges that face our society. For instance, it forecasts the design of smokeless cars and the development of biosensors to detect diseases before they become critical. It anticipates the need to recycle "grey" water from baths and washing machines, and to intensify agricultural production to meet the demands of an expanding population. Therefore, chemical engineers are central to improving the quality of our life. Their education and preparation for the world of work are critical to our future prosperity.

[Mr. George Mudie]

My hon. Friend raised a number of matters with which I shall try to deal in the time available. One was the supply of graduates. It is encouraging to note that the overall trend line for recruitment to chemical engineering courses is positive, with 1,141 students entering university to read the subject in 1997. A recent research study by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research into supply and demand for engineering, science and technology graduates, which is to be published shortly by my Department, indicates that the number of students entering engineering degrees is adequate. The study concluded that, with the possible exception of electronic engineering,

"the great majority of mismatches between supply and demand for technical graduates are attributable to quality problems rather than any overall shortfall in quantity".

Those findings are consistent with feedback from employers—including Glaxo Wellcome—who have made it clear that their concern lies primarily with the quality of the science graduates they recruit, not with the quantity available in the labour market. I shall develop that point later.

Engineering has suffered for too long from a poor image. That problem applies particularly to chemical engineering, as my hon. Friend's reference to Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory so vividly conveys. Therefore, I am delighted by the suggestion that steps be taken to counteract those misconceptions regarding the profession. Although the lead lies with industry, the Government are also playing their part by contributing toward a major long-term campaign co-ordinated by the Engineering Council. That campaign is targeted on presenting a more positive and dynamic image of engineering to children in the early stages of secondary education. Any further initiative by individual professional bodies, such as the Institution of Chemical Engineers, to reinforce that message would be much appreciated and warmly welcomed by the schools sector. I should also welcome early intervention in the schools sector on any occasion by hon. Members who are aware of the industry's problems with recruitment.

Recent reform of the education system will also encourage more students to enter science in the coming years. All secondary school pupils are now required to take at least one science subject, and 90 per cent. of pupils sitting GCSEs study double science. As part of our reform of the A-level system, the Government will promote a broader curriculum, which will result in more students studying science and technology-based subjects.

On the issue of entry standards, it is pleasing to see that many people are applying to become chemical engineers and that the A-level standards of entrants are high: more than 45 per cent. of entrants to chemical engineering courses have more than 24 A-level points, which is significantly higher than those of entrants to other undergraduate courses. That means that our graduate chemical engineers should be well placed to hold their own against their foreign counterparts.

However, if we are to meet the overall needs of industry, we must address skills demand at all levels. I mentioned earlier the issue of quality, as opposed to quantity. Rather than try further to expand the supply of chartered engineers, industry should examine the level of skills required, and whether those requirements are better met at incorporated engineer and technician level. The need to provide chemical engineering skills at levels other than that of chartered engineer is illustrated by a recent labour market survey conducted by the National Training Organization for the Chemical Manufacturing and Processing Industry. That survey found that the greatest number of vacancies were for manufacturing professionals, process technicians and process operators.

Among the engineering professions, chemical engineering is conspicuous for historically having little or no output of incorporated engineers, and it is time that that gap was plugged. The development of an incorporated engineer degree programme, and the introduction of non-accredited courses for chemical engineering and chemical technology would be an effective response to employer demand for skills at that level. Employers might also increase their stock of technicians by broadening their recruitment channels to include those who have completed a higher national diploma or higher national certificate. In response to the growing demand for technician-level skills identified by the skills task force, my Department has recently announced a significant expansion of sub-degree places.

I am delighted that my hon. Friend has drawn attention to the fact that chemical engineering attracts a higher proportion of women than do other engineering disciplines. As well as celebrating that achievement, should we not be analysing that attraction and promoting the positive features more widely? Female participation rates in chemical engineering courses are roughly double the rates in other engineering disciplines. The proportion peaked at 28 per cent. and is now running at about 25 per cent., although that is still too low.

My hon. Friend raised the question of course content, and it must be acknowledged that one obstacle to widening the base of chemical engineers has been the tendency of courses to focus too narrowly on traditional industries such as oil, petrochemicals and industrial gas. I shall expect the proposed review of course content to keep pace with economic developments and address the needs of other industries that draw extensively on chemical engineers, such as food and fine chemicals.

Knowledge alone is not an entry ticket to employment. Feedback from employers clearly indicates that many graduates lack key skills required in the workplace: a common criticism made by employers recruiting graduates in chemistry, industrial chemistry and chemical engineering is that recruits are simply not ready for the world of work. My Department is taking steps to improve their employability by responding to the concern expressed in the Dearing report about the lack of key skills. In coming years, many more graduates will emerge from higher education with competency in the six skill areas most commonly sought by employers: management, communications, team working, problem solving, numeracy and information technology.

Employers' general complaint about graduates is that they lack first-hand experience of work, and so tend to have unrealistic expectations and little awareness of what is expected of them. In response, my Department is spending £1.5 million on the development of high-quality work experience projects in the period 1998 to 2000. To ensure that the momentum is sustained, my Department

has supported the establishment of a national centre for work experience run by the National Council for Industry and Higher Education.

The skills and industrial knowledge of university staff are also an important influence on the quality of graduate supply. They are best kept up to date by improving links with industry. The recently announced higher education reach out fund, or HEROIC, will provide significant impetus, injecting a further £50 million over the next three years. That initiative, which is jointly funded by my Department and the Department of Trade and Industry, aims to improve the employability of graduates, the use of graduate skills made by business, and the transfer of technology and knowledge between higher education and business.

I note my hon. Friend's suggestion regarding differential salaries for university lecturers, but terms and conditions of employment for all university staff are a matter for employers. The Government await the outcome of the Bett report, which has not yet been officially published. My hon. Friend has suggested what that outcome will be, and I should be interested to hear how he came to know so many of the details. However, university salaries are a matter for employers and any money needed for that purpose will have to be drawn from funds allocated under the comprehensive spending review settlement.

I am aware of concerns regarding the geographical spread of chemical engineering courses and that the problem may become more acute if a higher percentage of students choose to attend their local university. The launch of regional development agencies in April this year will provide an opportunity to safeguard and, I hope, to expand provision that meets local needs. One of the RDAs' first tasks will be to agree a regional economic strategy in conjunction with key stakeholders. In regions such as the north-east, where chemical engineering is critical to the success of key industries, we would expect the regional economic strategy to include an analysis of that sector and to specify steps to tackle any problems.

I thank my hon. Friend for working hard to raise important matters relating to chemical engineering, which is a vital and important part of our economy. Like other sectors of engineering, chemical engineering lacks in public perception the glamour of other occupations, but the reality is that it is exciting and challenging, and offers participants a fine career. I hope that my hon. Friend's speech today inspires youngsters to enter the industry.

It being Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Sitting suspended, pursuant to Standing Order No. 10 (Wednesday sittings), till half-past Two o'clock.

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL (*By Order*)

Order for Second Reading read.

To be read a Second time on Tuesday 9 February.

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Tobacco Control

1. **Mr. Cynog Dafis** (Ceredigion): What resources will be made available by her Department for organising negotiations to establish an international framework convention on tobaceo control. [67502]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. George Foulkes): We are concerned at the ways in which tobacco products are being promoted in developing countries and have offered our support to the World Health Organisation in its work on an international framework which includes a global ban on tobacco advertising. We particularly welcome the strong lead the new director general, Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland, has taken on this issue. I can also confirm that our Department does not fund any activities that support the tobacco industry, but we do help farmers currently dependent on tobacco crops to diversify.

Mr. Dafis: I thank the Minister for that reply, but does not his Department provide funds for the malaria project—the other priority, along with tobacco, identified by Dr. Brundtland? Is not it absolutely vital that the Department provides resources to enable her campaign against tobacco in the third world to take effect? Does not the Minister agree that it is deplorable that United Kingdom companies, especially British American Tobacco, should target the most vulnerable groups in third-world countries, trading in death and suffering and undermining development at the same time? Is not it important that the Government distance themselves from such organisations and put money into Dr. Brundtland's campaign?

Mr. Foulkes: I sympathise with what the hon. Gentleman has said. It is too early to know exactly what funding is needed for the campaign, but we stand ready to contribute to it. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that developing countries are being targeted by tobacco companies. That is especially unfortunate, as those countries have limited regulations to deal with tobacco and, because they lack the necessary health structures, are ill-equipped to handle the consequences. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we are doing what we can to discourage the targeting of developing countries.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): Is it not the case that the European Union subsidises tobacco growers to the tune of hundreds of millions of pounds per annum? I know that it is not my hon. Friend's responsibility, but should not the Government strive to reduce that obscene subsidy to the fat tobacco growers in the southern countries of the European Union?

Mr. Foulkes: I think that my hon. Friend will have seen the Government's White Paper entitled "Smoking Kills", in which he will have read our comments about the European Union subsidy for tobacco. The Government do not support it and we have made representations about it. However, although this Department does not have special responsibility for the matter, I shall draw my hon. Friend's remarks to the Minister who has, and I know that they will be taken seriously into account.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Will the Minister look seriously at the conventions in this country governing what the tobacco companies do voluntarily? During the round-the-world Whitbread yacht race, the boat called Silk Cut, which carried no reference to tobacco on its structure, covered up its name in United Kingdom waters. A simple ban on advertising would not have prevented the company from showing that brand name or the names of other tobacco products. Therefore, before rushing ahead to ban advertising, will he consider carefully whether such a ban would be more effective than the conventions prevailing at present with the tobacco firms?

Mr. Foulkes: The hon. Gentleman's specific question relates to the United Kingdom, and could be better dealt with by one of my ministerial colleagues. However, the framework will be an international legal instrument circumscribing the global spread of tobacco products. It will include advertising, and it will take account of issues of the type raised by the hon. Gentleman. It is due to come into effect in 2003, but if we and other countries put a little more political will behind it, that could happen a lot earlier, as I would certainly wish.

Mr. Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley): Is there not a worry that if we stop the subsidy and prevent farmers from growing tobacco, they may move into other, more dangerous crops such as heroin and cannabis?

Mr. Foulkes: That is certainly not the kind of diversification that I would suggest. I can reassure my hon. Friend that a World bank study has shown that the social and health costs of tobacco are far greater than the economic benefits. When it comes to substitutes, consumers are most likely to divert expenditure to other products, and that creates jobs. Those products are not the kind rightly identified by my hon. Friend as equally as dangerous—if not more so—as tobacco.

Aid (EU)

2. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): How much of the United Kingdom's international aid is disbursed on its behalf by the EU. [67503]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): We inherited from the previous Administration a commitment that 30 per cent. of my budget should be channelled through the European Commission and a situation in which EC aid spending is both skewed against the poorest countries and often of poor quality. In December, we published our strategy to improve that performance, and I shall happily send copies to the hon. Gentleman. We are actively seeking support for our strategy in the Commission and the European Parliament and among member states. I welcome the report of the Select Committee on International Development supporting the Government's strategy.

Mr. Swayne: What progress has the right hon. Lady made in addressing the concerns of charities that feel that

the budget is skewed towards middle-income countries, leaving a relatively niggardly budget available for the poorest countries? What advantage is to be had from allowing our national priorities to be diluted by expenditure through the European Union?

Clare Short: The hon. Gentleman may wish to be aware that up until 1992, about 9 per cent. of my Department's budget went to the European Commission. The previous Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), then negotiated a big increase to 30 per cent. I inherited that position, and there is no use bewailing it. What I must do is try to make aid more effective and ensure that it is targeted much more on poor countries. We are working hard to draw the scandal of the current distribution to the attention of non-governmental organisations, the European Parliament, the different parts of the Commission and parliamentarians throughout Europe. I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's support for our attempts to put right a matter on which the previous Administration should have made greater efforts.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): To what extent do our European counterparts share my right hon. Friend's view of the need to eliminate debt while also reducing poverty? How highly do they rank those priorities in comparison with her ranking of them?

Clare Short: The European Commission contributed to the World bank's heavily indebted poor countries debt fund, but it is not a big player in that it has no export credit debt to deal with. On the elimination of poverty, it was agreed during our presidency of the European Union that the international poverty eradication target should become the centrepiece of development efforts. That commitment has also been incorporated in the Lomé mandate for renegotiation. There is room for a lot of improvement. We have a commitment in principle, but there is a long way to go to implementation.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Have not the strictures of the European Court of Auditors been particularly severe over the misapplication of the European Union aid budget? Would we not do a much better job by the British taxpayer if we had a purely national programme of aid that could be disbursed towards the hungry and the lean rather than the fat and fraudulent?

Clare Short: The hon. Gentleman is right that the ECA reports have been highly shocking, but the real problems are inefficiency and inability to disburse rather than simply fraud. There are 42 different financial systems at work in the area. That is a disgrace, but it was the previous Administration who made a binding commitment to have a high proportion of our budget spent in that way. I inherited that commitment from the Administration supported by the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Wilkinson *indicated dissent.*

Clare Short: The hon. Gentleman says that he did not support that commitment. That is interesting.

Finally, bilateral programmes are not always best. Countries cannot work in every needy country. We need our bilateral programmes in countries with which we have close historical associations, and we need efficient multilateral programmes. I agree that there is a lot of room for improvement in the efficiency of the EC system.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Is it a condition of such aid that discrimination against Christian communities should be ended, particularly, for example, in the Indian sub-continent? That matter is causing a great deal of concern and I hope that representation is being made to the authorities concerned.

Clare Short: Absolutely; we all share my hon. Friend's concern about that. We all seek to promote proper respect for human rights in all the countries in which we work. We must be careful about any further step. It is not right to punish the poor of a country for misbehaviour by certain authorities. We cannot just say that we will withdraw aid from a country in which someone is abusing human rights. We must use our influence to have human rights respected. As I said, we share my hon. Friend's concern about attacks on Christians in India.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): I congratulate the Secretary of State on what she is saying about the EU aid budget, but more interesting is what she is doing about it. Why did she not do more when she had the chair of the relevant Council during our EU presidency? Does she now regret that her close colleagues in the socialist group in the European Parliament voted against an opportunity to hold the responsible Commissioners to account? Were those not two golden opportunities to sort the matter out, and has she not missed both of them?

Clare Short: I am constantly astonished at the hon. Gentleman's complete ignorance after all this time and at his inability to look at the record of his Administration and the record of our presidency, and to read published documents and the Select Committee's report. The hon. Gentleman needs to do more work and to be more serious about his responsibility; then, between us, both sides of the House can do a better job.

Mr. Streeter: I am delighted that the right hon. Lady has met her vitriol quota for the week. The whole point of the EU is that it does not stand still. She has the opportunity in government to renegotiate the terms on which we contribute to the EU budget. Now that the financial settlement for the next seven years is up for renegotiation, is this not a golden opportunity for her to say that the United Kingdom will withdraw a sum equivalent to our contribution to the EU aid budget until the EU has shown itself capable of running the EU aid programme? Is it not time for the Secretary of State to be decisive? Is she not long on rhetoric and short on action?

Clare Short: I shall speak slowly and then the hon. Gentleman might learn something. The document I am holding sets out the British Government's policy. It spells out everything that is wrong and how it might be put right. The Select Committee on International Development, chaired in a distinguished way by a Conservative Member, has also just looked in great detail into the matter and made a series of recommendations. Those of us who are serious about this are working with other member states and all parts of the Commission and of the

European Parliament to obtain change, having inherited a complete mess from the previous Conservative Administration, supported by the hon. Gentleman—who has the cheek to sit there heckling when he does not read and does not understand what he is talking about.

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): I thank the Secretary of State for the reception that she has given the International Development Committee's report on the future of the EC development budget. What are the chances of having a single EU Commissioner in charge of overseas development, and of making the aid more efficient and delivering it to where it should go—the poorest of the poor in the third world?

Clare Short: As the hon. Gentleman knows, because he takes these matters seriously, we are at a time of great opportunity because we have to agree new funding proposals and the allocation between different countries. No one country can determine the outcome. We must engage intelligently with these questions and then build alliances between countries, parliamentarians, and so on. As the hon. Gentleman knows, I am working at that determinedly. I know that the Select Committee is, too, and that it is keen to work with development committees in other Parliaments. We also need to involve the NGO community. There is a real possibility of improvements; if we all work together, the chances of securing them—including, I hope, the appointment of a single Commissioner—are good.

Montserrat

3. **Mr. Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South): What progress her Department has made in helping the islanders of Montserrat to recover from the effects of the volcanic eruptions and to be better prepared for disaster in future. [67504]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. George Foulkes): Last month in Montserrat, I signed the country policy plan, agreed jointly with the Government of Montserrat, which commits us to spend £75 million over three years on its development. That is on top of nearly £60 million provided up to the end of the last financial year.

We have made great progress restoring normality to the 4,000 people remaining in the habitable north and are working to encourage the Government of Montserrat to accept their responsibility to promote development rather than demanding continuous and increasing subsidy from our aid budget.

Mr. Chapman: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the considerable progress that has been made so far in difficult circumstances. Will he outline the extent to which his discussions with the Government of Montserrat touched on the continuing monitoring of the threat still posed by the volcano? What is his assessment of the impact of all this on tourism, which greatly affects the future of Montserrat?

Mr. Foulkes: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. We are funding the Montserrat volcano observatory, with scientists from the British Geological Survey and the university of the West Indies. They carry out regular risk assessments, and I am pleased to be able to say that the last one allowed us to reoccupy part of the island, which improves tourism prospects. The next assessment will be undertaken later this month, and I hope that it will prove more promising in respect of the volcano.

There is growing confidence in Montserrat: one hotel is already being reopened, another new one is being built, and I hope that if the new assessment is positive, the possibility of reopening the W. H. Bramble airport will become a reality. The future of Montserrat will then be much brighter than it has been for many a year.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): In the light of what the Minister said in his initial answer to the question, why does he think that the Montserrat coroner described the Secretary of State's response to the recent disaster as unimaginative, grudging and tardy?

Mr. Foulkes: I think that the Montserrat coroner said that because he is ignorant. I met him when I was in Montserrat. The hon. Gentleman will know that the jury accepted that the deaths were caused because the people involved moved into areas that were prohibited. I asked the coroner why he had said that the conditions in the shelters had forced them to do that, and whether he had visited any of the shelters, as I have done—but he had visited none of them. I asked him whether he had spoken to staff from the Department for International Development and the governor, but he had spoken to none of them. If the coroner had done his work properly, we would take more account of his comments.

Sudan

4. **Ann Clwyd** (Cynon Valley): If she will make a statement on humanitarian assistance to Sudan. [67505]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): Despite the fact that the Government of Sudan have predicted a bumper harvest this year, we believe that Sudan will need humanitarian assistance again. The civil war, which, as my hon. Friend knows, is taking 80 per cent. of the Government of Sudan's budget, is the cause of the suffering. In the past year, we have worked to achieve a ceasefire and to increase international commitment to seek peace. We are also working to increase the effectiveness of the UN co-ordination of humanitarian programmes and to reduce the leakage of supplies to fighters.

Ann Clwyd: I am sure that my right hon. Friend agrees that it is an absolute tragedy that up to 2 million people have died in Sudan from famine, disease and fighting. Why is it, then, that only the European Union has imposed an arms embargo, while the UN Security Council imposes no such embargo? Could it be that some of the members of the UN Security Council are supplying arms to Sudan and that some countries are ignoring the fact that arms are reaching Sudan through third countries? Will my right hon. Friend take some action?

Clare Short: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I honestly think, as she knows, that the point has been reached where the war has gone on for so long and has caused so much suffering that the international community has almost given up on Sudan, given up on

seeking peace in Sudan and allowed humanitarian aid just to prop up another worsening situation. I think that things are turning somewhat but there is a long way to go. The United Nations special representative is re-engaged and the senior representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations has visited Sudan recently. The NGOs that are campaigning in New York have also re-engaged.

I take my hon. Friend's proposals very seriously. I assure her that we are doing all that we can to re-engage serious international opinion in seeking a peace in Sudan. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her support.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): Does the Secretary of State accept that humanitarian aid should also include simple health measures such as the vaccination of children and primary education? As I learned in Sudan, those things cannot be taken away by the effects of war, however hard the soldiers try.

Will the right hon. Lady accept also, in agreeing with the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), that we should make more effort to control the activities of arms brokers, who supply not only the two main sides in the civil war but the Arab militia, which terrorises the population of southern Sudan? When will the right hon. Lady do something through the European Union about arms supply?

Clare Short: On the first question, the hon. Lady knows that we are doing all in our power—I know that she has recently visited Sudan, and I have read her report—to improve the quality of assistance through UNICEF, and other bodies, to children in Sudan. However, it is impossible to run proper development programmes when populations are moving because of fighting. We must maintain the education of children, of course, but what can be achieved is limited because of the consequences of the fighting.

Secondly, I agree with the hon. Lady about arms in Sudan. The problem is that there is a litter of arms spreading across Africa wherever there is fighting, from all sort of illicit sources. It is a major cause of problems and more and more action is necessary to get rid of these arms. However, given the situation in Sudan, that is very difficult. We need a ceasefire and a commitment to peace. As the hon. Lady knows, we are working on that with her support.

Mr. Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): Can my right hon. Friend tell the House what information the Government received from the American Administration that convinced them that the factory that was bombed in Sudan last August by cruise missiles was producing chemical weapons and not pharmaceutical products?

Clare Short: As my hon. Friend will appreciate, I am not the appropriate Minister to answer his question. Therefore, I have not seen the reports, which I presume exist and to which he is referring. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence made a statement on these matters recently and I shall draw his attention to my hon. Friend's question and ensure that he is sent the appropriate material.

There is a continuing campaign on the bombing, which is suggesting that all the medical needs of people in Sudan are the consequences of the bombing. I repeat that 80 per cent. of the budget of the Sudan Government is spent on the war. That is the cause of the suffering, hunger and lack of medical care. It is in the power of the Sudan Government to put that right.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): Can the Secretary of State confirm that as much as two thirds of the £28 million that she gave to Sudan in aid last year has been stolen and goes to feed the fighters and not the suffering people in Sudan? Can she confirm also that what she so glibly refers to as leakage is still continuing? For the right hon. Lady, talk is cheap. We have certainly had our money's worth as she goes round pressing the United Nations and others to take action. Will the right hon. Lady tell the House what action she will take? Will she tell the House what she considers to be an acceptable level of theft from the aid budget? We know that for Labour in Europe it is 5 per cent., but 65 per cent. in Sudan is an obscenity.

Clare Short: The hon. Members for South–West Devon (Mr. Streeter) and for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) get the prize for being the rudest Opposition Front-Bench team. The hypocrisy is stunning. We inherited, from the Administration that the hon. Lady supported, a commitment of very high levels of aid contribution to Sudan, no action on peace and massive leakage of food to fighters. We have taken international initiatives on peace and other initiatives that have resulted in much change in the entire United Nations system to try to ensure that food supplies do not leak to fighters. Yet the hon. Lady and her vitriolic friend, the hon. Member for South–West Devon, just stand up, throw around ill-informed abuse and accuse others of being unpleasant.

International Financial Institutions

5. **Mr. Jim Dobbin** (Heywood and Middleton): What progress she is making in enhancing the role of the international financial institutions in development.

[67507]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): Since May 1997, we have been working to increase the focus of the World bank, the regional development banks and the International Monetary Fund on human development and poverty eradication. I frequently meet the presidents of those institutions to press that case. We welcome the commitment of the World bank and the African Development bank to the international poverty eradication targets and the IMF review of enhanced structural adjustment programmes which recognised the need to protect spending on health and education.

Mr. Dobbin: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. Latin America has dreadfully high levels of poverty and inequality. What is her Department doing to help to alleviate that?

Clare Short: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Latin America has the most inequality of any area on the planet. It is a middle-income area with vast natural resources, high levels of education and capacity and desperately high levels of poverty. It has to deal with inequality if the poorest are to be lifted out of poverty. We are a

shareholder in the Inter-American Development bank, which does more lending in Latin America than even the World bank. On Monday, we had a seminar in London with the president and chief economist of the Inter-American Development bank to discuss those questions and to drive forward an agenda for Latin America that will systemically reduce poverty.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): A multilateral agreement on investment has a vital role to play in raising living standards in the developing world. Why has progress on such an agreement slowed since the Government came to power and what is her Department doing to promote it?

Clare Short: I am afraid that the progress of the multilateral agreement on investment has not slowed; it has completely collapsed. The French have pulled out and there is now no prospect of that agreement being reached. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that an international investment agreement—particularly one that protects the interests of developing countries and gives them access arrangements so that they can attract more inward investment—is highly desirable and a key target for achieving faster development in the poorest countries. Negotiations now move over the World Trade Organisation and are in an analytical phase.

Caribbean (Crop Diversification)

6. **Mr. Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield): What action she has taken to encourage crop diversification in the Caribbean. [67508]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. George Foulkes): Together with the European Commission and the Caribbean development bank, we are funding a major programme of agricultural and economic diversification and a banana recovery plan which is essential to ensure that the industry becomes competitive. It is vital that new jobs are created in other sectors, as well as agriculture, and our funds for diversification are encouraging that.

Mr. Sheerman: My hon. Friend knows only too well that it will take time for many of those islands to diversify out of banana production. Will he redouble his efforts, and ask the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary to do the same, when talking to the Americans and, through them, the World Trade Organisation? Too many American businesses are using the WTO to harm the interests of the Caribbean banana producers.

Mr. Foulkes: The Prime Minister has heard my hon. Friend's question, and I assure him that the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary are very active on that matter. I know that my hon. Friend will be pleased that the compromise reached in Geneva late on 29 January averted the immediate risk of American retaliation against the European Union. We welcome that move to arbitration because it gives the European Union and the United States more time to work towards resolving the dispute without retaliation, which must be in the interests of British industry.

Debt Relief

8. **Mrs. Maria Fyfe** (Glasgow, Maryhill): What recent discussions she has had about the relief of debt; and if she will make a statement. [67511]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): I have had a number of discussions on debt relief recently, most notably at the annual meeting of the World bank and International Monetary Fund, where I and the Chancellor obtained agreement to a review of the heavily indebted poor countries initiative, and most recently at a meeting with the German Development Minister in Bonn at the end of November. I have also discussed the link between debt relief and poverty reduction with the Synod of the Church of England, and with the two umbrella groups representing British non-governmental organisations. We very much welcome the German initiative on debt, which reinforces our Mauritius mandate by seeking to speed up the implementation of the HIPC initiative, although I remain concerned that debt relief should be more closely linked to poverty reduction programmes. There is a way to go on that.

Mrs. Fyfe: I thank my right hon. Friend for that very comprehensive answer. Does she agree that the Government's success in getting the IMF and the World bank to review the HIPC process must result in speedier implementation in order to help the poor in poorer countries because, so far, progress has been rather too slow?

Clare Short: I agree with my hon. Friend. The commitment to a review is very important. We must hold the IMF and the World bank to it, and ensure that it is conducted quickly. As well as speeding up the process, we must ensure that it benefits the poor. The review concerning Uganda, which has just received debt relief, was very disappointing. As a result of the fall in coffee prices, it is as badly off as it was in the first place. The initiative needs modification as well as speeding up.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [67532] **Mr. John M. Taylor** (Solihull): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 3 February.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further such meetings later today.

Mr. Taylor: How does the £39 billion extra burden on business in this Parliament square with the enterprise culture? Are the Government signalling right and turning left?

The Prime Minister: No; I would have thought that turning right applies more to the hon. Gentleman's party.

The figure that he quotes is not correct. Indeed, under this Government, we have the lowest ever corporation tax and the lowest ever tax regime for small businesses. In addition, under this Government, we are consigning Tory boom and bust to history, where it belongs.

Q2. [67533] **Mr. John McAllion** (Dundee, East): Some of us on the Back Benches fear that our karma might be to return in the next life as Scottish Tories. Will my right hon. Friend therefore reassure us that, in this life, this Labour Government will continue, through socialist policies of redistribution, to tackle the massive inequalities in health, in access to decent housing and in wealth, which continue to disfigure and scar our country? Although we all accept that wealth creation is of course essential, may I remind him of the wisdom of the old clause IV, which never let us forget that the only true creators of wealth are the

"workers by hand or by brain"?

It is for them that the Labour party was created. It is in their interests that a Labour Government should govern.

The Prime Minister: Let me tell my hon. Friend what we are doing in this life to promote social justice. One hundred and thirty thousand Scottish families will benefit from the working families tax credit, 183,000 people in Scotland will benefit from the national minimum wage, the new deal for the unemployed has halved youth unemployment since the election and child benefit is up by more than 20 per cent. All those policies, opposed by the Tories, have been introduced by this Labour Government. This Labour Government believe that there is no inconsistency between policies that promote business and enterprise, and the pursuit of a more just society.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): So who does the Prime Minister think should be the next manager of the England football team?

The Prime Minister: Not the right hon. Gentleman, anyway. I am content to leave that to the Football Association.

Mr. Hague: We all thought that Glenn Hoddle's comments were outrageous and all joined in saying so, but given what the Prime Minister has just said, does he accept for future reference, and on reflection, that there is a limit to the number of things that politicians should poke their noses into—*[Interruption.]* There is—and that lecturing football associations on whom they should sack is beyond that limit?

The Prime Minister: I really cannot believe that the right hon. Gentleman is raising that issue. Of course, by making the comment himself, he has already commented on the issue. I suggest that he look at what I actually said.

Q3. [67534] **Angela Smith** (Basildon): Can the Prime Minister confirm how many telephone calls have been made to the nurses recruitment hotline since it was set up? I understand that, in the first few hours, there were more than 3,500. Will he pay tribute to Basildon hospital, which, before this initiative, recruited nurses by getting returners to work and paying for their training to get them back into the NHS? However, may I remind him, and ask him to ensure that he makes it clear, that new money that goes to the NHS must be put into front-line services and the nurses who serve the country?

The Prime Minister: As a result of the pay award that has been made to the nurses, the starting pay for a newly qualified nurse will increase by 12 per cent. In addition, 70,000 junior qualified nurses are to get an increase of over 8 per cent. As a result of our changes, next year two out of three nurses will earn more than £20,000 a year. Moreover, the number of people who have phoned the hotline—the number of calls that have been made—is now more than 7,000. It will take us time to rebuild the national health service, but we are on our way to doing it.

Mr. Paddy Ashdown (Yeovil): The pay rise for nurses is very welcome, but is it not also the case that, on Monday, the Government raided their own funds for modernising the health service to provide nurses with decent pay? Why should better pay for nurses have to mean worse services for patients?

The Prime Minister: But it does not. The modernisation fund has a specific sum of money within it for pay. That is the part that has been used. The rest of the modernisation fund, which is nine tenths of it—£1 billion—is intact and being used for such things as waiting lists, primary care projects, mental health projects, capital projects, doing up accident and emergency departments, and public health and community services. In addition, an extra sum of money is going into new technology in the health service. So the premise of the right hon. Gentleman's question is wrong.

Mr. Ashdown: Well, then, the Government's own statement made in July last year was wrong, because that statement, made in July 1998, specifically gives the purposes for the modernisation fund. It includes, as the Prime Minister has suggested, waiting lists, capital investment, education and training for staff, health education, primary care and mental health. It does not include pay. So I ask the Prime Minister once again: why have the Government taken £100 million out of front-line services for patients when the Chancellor has more than 50 times that sum in his Treasury reserves?

The Prime Minister: I think that that is more than a little churlish. Actually, I forgot to mention, when I gave the figures, that £120 million is going out from the modernisation fund for education and training, in addition to what I have just mentioned. However, in respect of paying nurses more, we happen to believe that giving nurses a better pay rise, attracting more people into the health service, is part of building a better health service. Nurses—such as those to whom I spoke who were getting their training down in Wales yesterday—believe that it is important both that we get modernisation in the health service and that they get the decent pay that they deserve. Under this Government, we are delivering both.

Q4. [67535] **Shona McIsaac** (Cleethorpes): Does my right hon. Friend welcome the massive support, in last night's vote, for reforming the House of Lords, and especially the words of support by the former Tory Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath)? Apart from showing the Tories in

tatters on that issue as usual, does it not prove that the Government want to create a second Chamber fit for the 21st century, whereas the current Leader of the Opposition merely harks back to the 18th, possibly the 17th, or the 16th, or whenever his last reincarnation was?

The Prime Minister: I think it is safe to say that only those on the Front Bench of the Conservative party are arguing the case for hereditary peers. The reasons for the reform are clear and sensible. First, it is wrong in this day and age that, by birth, such people can make laws. Secondly, and equally important, because of hereditary peers, the Conservatives have an in-built permanent majority of three or four to one in one of the two Houses of Parliament. It is plainly right that we should change that situation, which is regressive, backward-looking and unjust.

Sir Archie Hamilton (Epsom and Ewell): Does the Prime Minister accept that, for many people in Northern Ireland, the peace process is all take and no give, as far as Sinn Fein-IRA is concerned? Will he put the release of terrorist prisoners on hold until the mutilations and murders stop and the decommissioning of weapons starts?

The Prime Minister: Without repeating what I said in the exchanges last week, it is worth pointing out to the right hon. Gentleman that, were we to bring the entire process to an end, the result would not be less violence in Northern Ireland. I repeat what I said previously: punishment beatings and appalling atrocities were also going on during the ceasefire under the previous Government. However, as I have made clear, the best possible way in which we can push the process forward in Northern Ireland is for all aspects of the agreement to be implemented. We have made enormous progress, and I hope that both sides of the House can work to make more.

Q5. [67536] **Mr. Jim Cunningham** (Coventry, South): Is my right hon. Friend aware that, throughout the country, under the new deal, youth unemployment has fallen? Is he also aware that, in Coventry, under the Coventry version of the new deal, youth unemployment has fallen by more than 30 per cent? Will he commend the Coventry scheme to the rest of the country? Does he recall that the Opposition voted against the new deal and the windfall tax levy? Should not the Opposition apologise to every young person in the country?

The Prime Minister: As a result of the new deal, the rate of youth unemployment has very nearly halved since the general election—50,000 young people have gone into jobs, and 200,000 or more are going through the programme. That is a good step for the country on anybody's terms. We know that it was opposed by the Conservative party, and that the Conservatives are still opposed to it. They are wrong. They do not understand that high levels of youth and long-term unemployment are a blight on the country's future.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): The Prime Minister will know that there is huge public concern about the possible health and environmental impact of genetically modified crops. There was a debate on the subject in the House today. Why have the Government not accepted the advice of English Nature, which is by law the Government's adviser on those matters, by delaying for at least three years the commercial release of those crops, until more research is done?

The Prime Minister: We are doing research on that, and a Government committee is examining the matter. We must proceed on the best scientific evidence. The potential of genetically modified crops is very great indeed. It is important that we proceed logically and scientifically, not simply on the basis of prejudice on either side of the debate.

Mr. Hague: We agree that we must proceed on the basis of scientific evidence, but the Government are overruling advice about the environmental impact from the expert body which, by law, exists to advise them on such matters.

It has also emerged that there was a meeting at which it was decided to use supermarket loyalty cards to monitor the purchase of genetically modified foods in various parts of the country, and then to monitor the cases of cancer in the corresponding areas. When concerns exist on such a scale, would it not be better to impose a moratorium, and to do so now?

The Prime Minister: I do not think it would be sensible to impose a moratorium. I am informed that the committee is meeting today. It is important that we proceed on the basis of the scientific evidence. These are big issues, and of course there is public concern about them. The first stage of meeting that public concern is to debate the information. I assume that the right hon. Gentleman is advancing the Opposition's position. It is curious that they should ask for a moratorium geared to a particular number of years, rather than proceeding on the basis of the scientific evidence.

Mr. Hague: It is not curious that the Opposition are asking for a moratorium—English Nature is asking for one. *[Interruption.]* It is no good Labour Members sneering about English Nature. That body is paid by the Government to give advice on these matters. The effect of the muddle in Government policy is to increase public concern, not to decrease it. Why do the Government not do the common-sense thing, listen to the advice of their experts and at least put on hold the release of new and unfamiliar seeds until the research is done?

The Prime Minister: I think that it would increase public concern if we adopted the course of action that the right hon. Gentleman advocates. A Government committee is looking at the issue on the basis of scientific evidence, and I think that that is the best way to proceed. The worst way to proceed would be to raise fears in the public mind before the evidence is put before the people. With the greatest respect—I do not think that this should be a great political issue between the parties—the right hon. Gentleman's course of action is wrong. I think that it is far better and more important to proceed on the basis of scientific evidence.

As for food safety issues—far be it from me to accuse the right hon. Gentleman of opportunism—I point out that most of the main problems with food safety in this country have resulted from the Conservative Government's legacy.

Q6. [67537] **Mr. Michael Connarty** (Falkirk, East): Is my right hon. Friend aware that his Government today

allocated an additional £112 million to guarantee places for 60 per cent. of three-year-olds in pre-school nurseries in Scotland? Will he take the opportunity, when he makes his welcome visit to Scotland on Friday, to remind parents, teachers and educators in Scotland that the Labour party is the only party in Scotland with published policies for Scottish education, and ask them to sit down in a spirit of co-operation and realise the vision that is set out in Labour's excellent document "Targeting Excellence: Modernising Scotland's Schools"?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. The increase of £112 million for pre-school education will allow many more three and four-year-olds to attend nursery school in Scotland. Some 100,000 children in Scotland will receive grant-funded pre-school education in the next school session. We are the only political party in Scotland with proposals that increase the amount of nursery education. There can be no more important start for Scottish children than getting the education that they deserve.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): Will the Prime Minister do everything in his power to assist the 750 employees of Lucas-SEI in Ystradgynlais in my constituency who are about to lose their jobs because of the closure of the manufacturing plant? Does the Prime Minister propose to visit this stricken community, whose people are the salt of the earth? Will he comment on the activities of the chief executive of Lucas Varity, Victor Rice, who stands to benefit by £17 million from the takeover by TRW? Does the Prime Minister not think that that is the unacceptable face of global capitalism at work?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman probably knows, Ministers are in discussion with the company and we will do all that we possibly can. We sympathise very much with anyone who risks losing his or her job as a result of the sale. It is important to see what we can do and, as soon as we are able to give details, we shall do so.

Q7. [67538] **Mr. Harry Barnes** (North-East Derbyshire): I welcome the fact that the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, the right hon. Member for East Kilbride (Mr. Ingram), is due to meet Families Against Intimidation and Terror to discuss beatings and intimidation in Northern Ireland. I hope that the Prime Minister will agree to meet that group at a later stage. Would it not be a good idea if Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch were involved in monitoring beatings and intimidation in Northern Ireland and reporting on those events? That would put pressure on the paramilitary groups to back down. Amnesty seems to favour this notion; will the Government give it good passage?

The Prime Minister: The idea advanced by my hon. Friend has also been proposed by the leader of the Ulster Unionist party. It is certainly worth considering, and I look forward to discussing it with the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) later this afternoon.

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): Why does the Prime Minister believe that it is right to levy the same food tax on a small corner shop as on a Sainsbury's superstore?

The Prime Minister: I assume that it is a matter of common ground between us that the Food Standards Agency should be established and that the cost should not be borne entirely by the taxpayers—although they bear the majority of it at present. The question is whether it is better to do that by a flat-rate or a graduated charge. That is one of the issues that will be considered during the consultation process. We proposed the idea originally because we thought that it would be much simpler and easier to administer than a graduated charge. However, that is one of the things that the consultation paper will address.

Q8. [67539] **Mr. Brian H. Donohoe** (Cunninghame, South): I am sure that my right hon. Friend will be aware of Volvo's announcement last week on closing its factory in my constituency, with the loss of 450 jobs. Realising the impact that that will have on my constituency and the surrounding area in Ayrshire, he will be pleased to know of the effect of the intervention of a Minister. May I put on record my thanks for the work that has been undertaken by the Scottish Office?

My right hon. Friend will also be aware that, in November, I asked him a question about the air traffic control system at Prestwick. What influence has been brought to bear, and what has been done by the Government, since that question was asked?

The Prime Minister: First, on the issue of Volvo, as my hon. Friend knows, the Scottish Office is having discussions with the company. The potential for job losses obviously exists for reasons that are outside the Government's control, but we will continue to have those discussions.

In respect of National Air Traffic Services, we are firmly committed to a two-centre strategy. I can assure my hon. Friend that one of those centres will be at Prestwick. That is good news for Scotland, and it will ensure air traffic control facilities in Scotland for a long time. I also understand that my right hon. Friend the Minister of Transport has written to my hon. Friend, offering to meet him to repeat these assurances.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): Is the Prime Minister aware of the huge suffering being experienced by the people of Gibraltar, who are having great hardship imposed because of an alleged secret deal with the British Government, which, in fairness, the Foreign Office has denied? As he claims to have established a special relationship with the European Union, is there really nothing he can do to protect the Gibraltarians, who are wholly peace-loving people, against illegal, bully-boy tactics by the Spanish Government?

The Prime Minister: We are in fact working very closely with the Gibraltar authorities. As a result of that, and as the hon. Gentleman has probably read this morning, the Chief Secretary in Gibraltar has made arrangements in order to bring this dispute to an end, on which we very much hope there will be proper progress.

In relation to Gibraltar more generally, the position of the Government is unchanged. There is no secret deal of any nature at all. We continue to do everything we can to ease the tension between Spain and Gibraltar. The point

that I always make to anyone from the Spanish authorities is that the best way forward for them in their relations with Gibraltar is to treat those relations with sensitivity.

Q9. [67540] **Mr. John Home Robertson** (East Lothian): I am afraid that this is getting a bit like Scottish questions.

Has my right hon. Friend noticed that virtually every unit in the armed forces of the United Kingdom has its share of Scots, that it is not unheard of for English, Welsh and Irish personnel to serve in Scottish regiments and that the British armed forces are all the stronger for that?

That said, has my right hon. Friend read the nauseating words of Colonel Stuart Crawford, the Scottish National party defence spokesman, who describes the Scots Guards as

"a quasi-mercenary regiment . . . tainted by their association with England"?

Will my right hon. Friend condemn the nationalist plan for ethnic dismantling of the armed forces of the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: I think that these are not the first of SNP comments on defence that have dismayed people. Quite apart from wanting to dismantle the whole of the defences of Scotland, get Scotland out of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, abandon the nuclear protection and a whole series of other things, and as well as not being trusted on defence, the SNP is not trusted on tax and jobs, and it is not trusted with running a Scottish Parliament which it wants to use as a ramp for independence. Scotland and England are stronger together.

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): Is the Prime Minister aware that, in Kent, North Yorkshire, north London and elsewhere this year, parent will be set against parent, teacher against teacher and governor against governor by his sudden-death grammar school ballots? Is that not simply a class-ridden obsession with structure rather than standards?

The Prime Minister: No; because under our proposals people are able to vote, whereas under the system that the previous Government had in place the decision was made by the local education authority. Given Conservative Members views on local education authorities, I should have thought that they would be with us on this one.

Q10. [67541] **Mr. Stephen Hepburn** (Jarrow): Is the Prime Minister aware that Swan Hunter shipbuilders on the Tyne have been offered the chance to submit a bid for one of the Royal Navy supply ships that is out for contract? If it is successful, the £130 million contract will provide many thousands of new, highly skilled jobs on the Tyne for many years to come. Is he also aware that, if it is successful, it will be the first time that ships have been built in the Tyne for many years? To satisfy the companies, communities and trade unions that have worked towards obtaining the contract, will he give an assurance that there will be a level playing field?

The Prime Minister: We are delighted at Swan Hunter's success. It is one of 10 companies that we believe have the technical expertise and capability to build the two new landing ships. It has been passed a copy of the initial draft specification, and has been asked to provide indicative prices. I cannot say any more about that at this stage, except that the shipping industry on the Tyne has a tremendous and proud history, and it would be great to think that it also has a proud future.

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): Will the Prime Minister confirm that, during the talks process, Sinn Fein told him and the Prime Minister of the Irish Republic that it could not force the IRA to decommission weapons?

The Prime Minister: No. It is clearly set out in the agreement that decommissioning is part of the agreement, and that Sinn Fein, like every other party, is expected to do what it can to bring about decommissioning. It is bound by that agreement. If I may say respectfully to the hon. Gentleman, it would be foolish of us to agree that Sinn Fein is under no such obligation. It should be under that obligation; it is in the agreement, and we intend to hold Sinn Fein to it.

Q11. [67542] **Mr. John Healey** (Wentworth): My right hon. Friend will recall the meningitis outbreaks across the country over Christmas, and may know that in Rotherham we had seven cases in nine days, including two tragic deaths of students at Wath comprehensive school. Is he aware that three quarters of the cases in Rotherham in the past year have been of meningitis type C, for which there is a vaccine? Given that this local pattern is reflected nationally in the growing proportion of meningitis C cases, will he use his offices to encourage the Secretary of State for Health to take a fresh look at the arguments for and against a national vaccination programme?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that my right hon. Friend will have heard my hon. Friend's question. I am not able to give my hon. Friend an answer this afternoon, but I shall make inquiries and write to him about the matter.

Mr. Stephen Dorrell (Charnwood): Does the Prime Minister agree with me that schools should be free, if they so wish, to adopt a policy of selection by interview or examination?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend has set out the Government's position on selection, and I refer the right hon. Gentleman to that. As a result of the Government's policies, there will be greater investment in our schools, which was denied them by the previous Government. Whatever policies are pursued on selection, if there are not enough properly funded, good schools for parents to choose from, children will not get a proper education. The difference between this side and his party is that we believe in an education system for all our children, not just a few.

Q13. [67544] **Mr. Paul Stinchcombe** (Wellingborough): Does my right hon. Friend agree that there are some ex-service men in the country who have been wrongly deprived of and denied war pensions for many years? If he does, does he also agree that it would be sensible to give back to the Secretary of State the discretion to award backdated war pensions in appropriate and compelling cases—a discretion that was denied by the previous Government?

The Prime Minister: I know that my hon. Friend has an Adjournment debate on this subject. I am sure that my

right hon. Friend will listen carefully to my hon. Friend's claims and representations. We will always consider ways of improving the situation, but we must do so within the Government's overall cost budget. We shall certainly listen to my hon. Friend's representations.

Q14. [67545] **Mr. Andrew Lansley** (South Cambridgeshire): When does the Prime Minister expect the rate of growth in the United Kingdom economy to return to 3.5 per cent. per annum or better?

The Prime Minister: We have set out our growth forecasts for the Government and, as a result of the policies that this Government have pursued, we are predicting an increase in growth next year and growth in—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps Opposition Members could listen to the answers. We are predicting that growth will go over 3 per cent. in two years' time. So the position that the hon. Gentleman outlined is answered. What would be most disastrous, however, is if we were to pursue the policies that he wants pursued, including taking away Bank of England independence, scrapping the new deal for young people, getting rid of the working families tax credit and doubling the national debt. The Labour party will be the party of economic stability, not the boom and bust of the Tories.

Insolvency Act 1986 (Amendment)

3.30 pm

Mr. Richard Page (South-West Hertfordshire): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend the Insolvency Act 1986 so as to disqualify from appointment as receiver or liquidator of a company any person or company called in to carry out a financial appraisal of that company.

My comments today will be almost identical to the words used by Baroness Dean, when she spoke on a similar subject in the other place last week. I was pleased to learn that the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, in his Mansion House speech, also touched on my concerns. It is nice to know that all minds are thinking in the same direction.

The Bill aims to remove a long-standing problem in our legislation. Under the present law, firms of accountants that are called in by the banks or other lenders to report on companies in difficulties can be, and often are, appointed as administrative receivers if the findings are sufficiently serious. Those firms of accountants are obliged to safeguard the capital of the lenders: they are not concerned about the continuity and survival of the borrowing company. Indeed, all too often, the accountants have a vested interest in putting the companies on which they report into receivership.

As long ago as 1992, 30 per cent. of insolvency practitioners recognised that the issue was a real and not just an apparent conflict of interests. It is like giving a judge and jury £10 for every prisoner whom they set free, but £100 for every prisoner whom they find guilty. No one would think that that was a fair law and no one would say that justice was being done under such rules. The same logic applies to the situation today, in which insolvency practitioners are so often the reporting accountants.

Serious mistakes have been made under the present arrangements. One accounting firm investigating a company to whom a bank had lent money reported that it was in serious difficulties. The accountants recommended that their related firm of insolvency practitioners should be brought in to act as receivers. It took the intervention of the Postern Executive group, a group specialising in business recovery, and a report from a second firm of accountants to persuade the bank that a mistake had been made. In due course, the loan was repaid, the secured and unsecured creditors were paid and hundreds of jobs were saved.

I could cite numerous examples, but I shall give only one more. The owner of a dairy business in Pembrokeshire sought the advice of his bank on the value of his stock. He was visited by a 24-year-old accountant who worked for one of the big five. After a single day on the farm, that expert valued the cheese held in the dairy at half the figure the owner had calculated. The visit cost the owner £3,000. The accountancy firm—surprise, surprise—was appointed to act by the bank as the receiver for the business. As events turned out, the receiver could not milk 200 cows a day or keep them in good health for sale and, when the original owner obtained another valuation for his stock, the bank granted him overdraft facilities of £1 million and he was able to save much of his operation.

All those problems flowed from the visit of a young accountant who was inexperienced in farming, but whose firm could have benefited from the dairy business going into receivership. Legal action was unsuccessful, because receivers have a duty of care only to the party that appoints them: the bank. For individuals and companies who face adverse reports, there is, sadly, usually no effective remedy short of legal action. Directors of companies being investigated are all too often presented with winding-up petitions without any opportunity to make representation or any avenue of appeal. That is neither fair nor right. No wonder accountants are often said to exist to kill the wounded and count the dead.

Reputable bodies working in the industry recognise the need for action. For example, the Royal Bank of Scotland has altered its entire approach to companies in difficulties. For it, receivership is the last resort. The results have been dramatic. In 1992, it had an 11 per cent. receivership rate. Four years later, that figure had dropped to only 5 per cent. In 1996, it put only 48 companies into receivership, a fall of 82 per cent. over four years. The more positive approach meant that some 79 companies and almost 5,600 jobs were saved. Even with the companies put into liquidation, the new approach meant that it was possible to sell off many parts as viable concerns.

The key element in the strategy is the bank's decision not to appoint investigating accountants as receivers. It has recognised the conflict of interest that investigating accountants may face and acted to remove it. It prefers to diagnose the problems that borrowing companies face and strengthen their management capability to deal with them. If only all banks would adopt such an approach.

There are wider lessons to be learned for the eight bodies engaged in licensing insolvency practitioners. They should have acted long ago to resolve this issue. My major contention about the potential conflicts of interest that arise when investigating accountants act as administrative receivers was conceded by Lord McIntosh of Haringey speaking for the Government in another place last week. However, I do not accept his repetition of the old argument about the advantages in terms of knowledge that a firm of investigative accountants has about a business when appointed as the administrative receiver. That only perpetuates the existing problem over the conflict of interest.

The promise of legislation to provide for a moratorium on creditors' actions while a company is in difficulties and proposals are formulated is all very well but neither that nor the joint Treasury and Department of Trade and Industry review of the law on company rescue mechanisms promised in last December's competitiveness White Paper offers the remedies that are needed right now, especially as the economy may move into recession.

There have been too many delays in tackling the matter. Those professionally involved, such as the banks, lending institutions and, above all, the companies that have experienced scrutiny by investigating accountants, understand the conflict of interest. The case for independent regulation of those who play both roles, perhaps through an insolvency commissioner, is strong. I prefer effective self-regulation to Government action, but if the eight bodies engaged in insolvency licensing cannot take the necessary steps to end this obvious conflict of interest, the duty to act falls upon Parliament and the Government.

I know that the Government are studying changing the Insolvency Act 1986 and that this issue, as we know from the Mansion House speech, is attracting Ministers' attention. That is all to the good and I welcome it, but action is needed now, not in two, three or four years. The Bill reflects important changes of attitude towards that problem outside Whitehall and Westminster. It provides a solution to that long-standing conflict of interest and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Richard Page, Mr. Andrew Rowe, Mr. Tony Colman, Mr. Andrew Lansley, Mr. Robin Corbett and Mr. Richard Spring.

INSOLVENCY ACT 1986 (AMENDMENT)

Mr. Richard Page accordingly presented a Bill to amend the Insolvency Act 1986 so as to disqualify from appointment as receiver or liquidator of a company any person or company called in to carry out a financial appraisal of that company: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 26 February, and to be printed [Bill 40].

Opposition Day

[5TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Pensions

Madam Speaker: We now come to the first debate on the Opposition motions. I have selected the amendment standing in the name of the Prime Minister.

3.40 pm

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): I beg to move,

That this House believes the Government has failed pensioners and thrown away a unique opportunity for reform; deplores their attack on pensioners through the abolition of the ACT dividend tax credit, which will cost pensioners and all future pensioners £5 billion per year; believes the Government has further hurt occupational schemes by increasing the regulatory and cost burden in the pensions Green Paper; rejects the Government's proposals, which will make pension provision more complex and offer no real security for pensioners in the future; and condemns the Government for their extensions of means-testing in the welfare and pensions system, which will undermine the incentive to save.

Today's debate is an opportunity for us to consider the Government's record after two years of this Parliament to find out whether some of their more grandiose pledges, and perhaps even some of their more sensible pledges, have been met. In opposition, the Labour party said that it would improve the situation for pensioners. We should set out clearly the position that the Labour party inherited when it came into power and decide whether it has improved it.

The Government inherited funded pension provision totalling about £750 billion—more provision than in the rest of Europe put together. Furthermore, between 1979 and 1996, pensioner incomes rose by more than 60 per cent. In 1979, 46 per cent. of pensioners were in the poorest fifth of the population by income distribution, but, by 1996, that percentage had more than halved and less than 20 per cent. of pensioners were in the poorest fifth. While Conservative Members accepted that there was still more to be done, that was a major contribution—all in all, it is a position which many countries in Europe thoroughly envy, as they wish that they had such a strong and powerful position.

What have the Government done from the outset to improve the situation or to make a difference that matters to pensioners? Their first act, almost as soon as they came to power, was to strike a blow at pensioners. In their manifesto they said:

"we will support and strengthen the framework for occupational pensions."

I will show that they have done entirely the opposite. The abolition of the advance corporation tax dividend tax credit, which they did almost within a month of their arrival in government, is simply a tax which will cost future pensioners more than £5.5 billion a year. It is the equivalent of 4p in the pound on basic rate income tax. In essence, that means that pension funds will have less money to invest, so pensions will be lower unless employers and employees pay more money into their schemes.

Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe (Bradford, South): I do not want to stop the hon. Gentleman's flow, but he mentioned what

[Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe]

Labour had inherited and the background to today's debate. Will he stick to the narrow subject of pensions, or will he widen the debate to cover the other ways in which the previous Government affected pensioners' incomes, such as putting value added tax on fuel?

Mr. Duncan Smith: The hon. Gentleman will have every opportunity to discuss the Government amendment, which intriguingly avoids the main purpose of the debate, which is to discuss what the Government have done to improve pensioner incomes through pension reform. That is the critical issue. The reality is that, as we have seen in the media and through hon. Members in the House, pensioners will on balance be worse off, not better off, as a result of all those changes. The key point is whether pensioners will be better off as a result of the changes made to pensions provision—that is what we are debating.

Let us return to the withdrawal of ACT dividend tax credit. In doing that, the Government struck a huge blow to pension funds and future pensioners; it is almost impossible to over-emphasise what a blow that was. After that, any pensioner would have been stunned by the blithe statement made by the then Financial Secretary to the Treasury, now the Paymaster General:

"People should understand that our reforms will benefit pension funds."—[*Official Report*, 3 July 1997; Vol. 297, c. 507.]

The Government's own actuaries do not agree with that statement. The Government Actuary's report states:

"This reduces the amount of dividend income from UK equities by just under 20 per cent. relative to the previous tax position."

That is a huge blow to anyone whose future retirement income depends on that investment. Even if the Paymaster General cannot add up, she should not assume that others have the same failing.

At a stroke, the new tax rise rendered final salary schemes far more expensive to maintain and thus less viable. I have spoken to one or two funds and it was interesting to discover the extent to which they have been hit. The Post Office pension fund finds itself down by £15 million a year, the Sainsbury pension scheme is less viable by £10 million a year and the railways pension fund is less viable by £30 million a year, all as a result of the Government's actions.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston): As the hon. Gentleman is clearly concerned about the well-being of those in work who provide for their old age, will he comment on what the previous Government did to the state earnings-related pension scheme and on how, over 18 years, they totally undermined its value?

Mr. Duncan Smith: I am intrigued that the hon. Lady is speaking from her brief from the Whips Office, which tells her to ask that question. What she says is utter rubbish: the reality is that the previous Government have a lot to be proud of in terms of pensions reform and this country's pensions provision is the envy of most of Europe and perhaps of the western world.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): May I add to my hon. Friend's list of pension funds that will lose money as a result of the changes the Church of England pension fund, which will lose some £12 million? Is he aware that other Churches are taking actuarial advice on the impact on their pension funds? Already, the Church of England anticipates difficulties with meeting commitments from its latest clergy stipend fund.

Mr. Duncan Smith: My right hon. Friend is right—I shall with alacrity add the Church of England to my list. I omitted to mention many names on the list, because to read them all out would have taken at least 10 minutes. Even local government now faces huge difficulties because of what the Government did. It cannot be understated how hard the changes have hit many pension funds.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Duncan Smith: No, I shall not give way. Labour Members do not like what I am saying—as in "Dads' Army", "They don't like it up 'em," but the facts are that the Government's actions really hurt pensioners and that the Labour party did not tell pensioners the truth at the time of the election.

The Government Actuary had to be brought in to carry out an out-of-sequence review, such was the mess wrought by the new tax. The review resulted in a prescription designed to restore some balance to the position on contracting out from SERPS, but the Government then proceeded to make matters worse, which shows how mean-minded and spiteful they are. They chose to freeze the salary-related schemes rebate and to reduce the contracted-out money purchase schemes rebate, which meant that they destroyed one viable option for people and made salary-related schemes even less viable than before. Not content with hurting pensioners through the ACT tax dividend credit withdrawal, the Government went and squeezed them further when the Government Actuary gave them an opportunity to do so.

The Government's first decision on taking power has created chaos and hurt many people. It is important to note that their actions have struck a blow at occupational pension schemes—the very schemes that they said they thought were rather good, which makes their actions not only ironic, but rather stupid.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): My hon. Friend mentioned the public sector, but is he aware that the chief constable of Devon and Cornwall police, who received an appalling local government settlement this year, has to make grave choices because of the need to find additional funds to prop up the shortfall caused by the Government's action on ACT?

Mr. Duncan Smith: I agree with my hon. Friend. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), she has added to the list of examples of the problems and hurt being inflicted on pensioners as a direct result of the Government's actions.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): I, too, should like to add to that list. Small borough councils have also been hit hard, and the hardest hit are those in the shire areas.

They are having to make extraordinary efforts to cope with the stealth tax—the unexploded bomb—that the Labour Government have introduced. Already, local authority pensioners say that they would never have voted Labour if they had known that the Government were going to raid their pension schemes.

Mr. Duncan Smith: I thank my hon. Friend. That is yet another example for the list. However, I urge my right hon. and hon. Friends to restrain themselves slightly on this matter, as otherwise we shall never move on. The point has been made absolutely clearly: pension funds and future pensioners across the country will suffer as a direct result of the mean-mindedness of a Government who never revealed what they intended to do.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: The hon. Gentleman has made his case powerfully, and it is clear that he feels very strongly about the matter. According to the Opposition motion, we are talking about £5 billion. Does he intend to reverse the change in the law at the next general election? Will he go into that election with such a proposal?

Mr. Duncan Smith: The hon. Gentleman has been here long enough—

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): Yes or no?

Mr. Duncan Smith: I shall answer that question because I am intrigued by Labour Members. The Government have been in power for two years, but already they are trying to decide whether to vote Conservative at the next election. It is absolutely amazing. The hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) still does not know how he will vote, yet he is clearly en route to a decision. The hon. Gentleman knows as well as I do that, when we get back into power, we shall take whatever decisions are needed to rectify the problems facing pensioners. He must wait patiently, for we will make our proposals in time for him to make his decision about how to vote at the next election.

Throughout their first 18 months in power, the Government have meandered through their pensions review. Month after month, they have promised a Green Paper. They have even put on road shows, which were supposed to be shows on the road to Damascus—although some of them seem to have got lost somewhere on a wet night in Dudley. However, those shows never got anywhere. Despite their great promises, it has become clear that members of the Labour party had done no thinking about pensions reform in opposition and that they are trying to find a solution now that they are in office.

There was one exception—the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), who now sits, honourably, on the Back Benches. What is most interesting about the review process is that the very man asked by the Prime Minister, both before and after the election, to think the unthinkable and to produce a plan for Labour's first term in office was rapidly sidelined. Sadly, he was not put in charge even of the pensions review. Then—thanks to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and, perhaps, even to the present Secretary of State—he was squeezed out.

The result of that, and of the fact that no real thinking was going on at all, was a Green Paper cobbled together with one eye cocked towards the Treasury's agenda. It looked for a way to get through to the election without too much trouble.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Duncan Smith: In a minute, as I should like to finish this point.

The Government's pensions proposals are in a mess. Rather than creating reforms to simplify the provision of pensions, they have made the system progressively more complex and more difficult to understand. That, in turn, will lead to great uncertainty over future pensions. *The Times* stated:

"New Labour's new pension system was intended to make life simple for savers . . . Instead potential savers will be confronted with a mind-bogglingly complex array of options".

The *Daily Mail* said:

"Mr. Darling has come out with a muddled and muddling, half-baked set of proposals".

However, if the Secretary of State does not like hearing only from the media, he—and the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle), who is sitting next to him—might like to hear from Mervyn Kohler of Help the Aged, who said:

"The Government has let a great opportunity slip through its hands. This pensions review could have made radical changes to a system in dire need of reform; sadly, it does not."

Mr. Webb: If I have followed the hon. Gentleman's argument correctly, I believe that he said that Labour in opposition should have had a fully worked out pensions policy. Is he now promising that the Conservative party will have such a policy?

Mr. Duncan Smith: Labour, when in opposition, should have thought long enough to have produced a policy that they could implement on arrival. I think it is fair to say that. When we get ready to take over Government—it will be very soon—we shall have a plan worked out, and we shall present that plan and implement it. That is exactly what previous Conservative Governments have done, and we shall do it again.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ms Stuart *rose—*

Mr. Duncan Smith: No, I shall give way later.

There are four main problems with the Green Paper. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members do not like to hear of such things because they are so used to receiving briefs saying, "The Government are wonderful; intervene on this." They will have to hear the truth today.

There are four main failures in the Green Paper. The Secretary of State will not be surprised to hear that the first is that it massively increases means testing. One of the most significant areas of the Government's pensions proposals is the growth of means tests on pensioner

[Mr. Duncan Smith]

incomes. The introduction of the minimum pensions guarantee and the Green Paper's pledge on the guarantee—

"Over the long term, our aim is that it should rise in line with earnings"—

mean that the Government are rapidly increasing the role of the means test in pensioner incomes.

The Association of Retired and Persons over 50 claims that:

"the Government's own estimates suggest that the number of UK pensioners relying on means tested benefits under the Minimum Income Guarantee could rise from 1 in 5 today to 1 in 4 by 2050."

The Institute for Fiscal Studies, which the Government no longer likes although they used to work with it when they were in opposition, says that the means-tested guarantee "institutionalises means testing".

The Government's reliance on an increasing means-test element will become a massive disincentive to saving as it claws further and further up the line of those who would wish to save. Frankly, anyone on average earnings might as well not bother; they will find that those who did not bother will receive just as much final retirement income.

Meanwhile, the Government preside over a falling savings ratio. They inherited a ratio of more than 10 per cent., but by the time that they leave Government, it will be around 7 per cent. We are at a stage of the economic cycle when the ratio would normally be rising, not falling. They already have the problem that it is going in the wrong direction. Their changes will make that problem worse.

The right hon. Member for Birkenhead has said:

"It means that if you don't bother to save you will just pick this"—

the minimum guarantee—

"up in the end anyway. So the Jack the Lads who don't intend saving will benefit."

That is precisely the point: by increasing the level of the means test, the Government have discouraged saving. They leave everyone saying, "Why should I bother?" People who do not bother will get roughly the same income as those who take the difficult choice, year after year, to save money that they could otherwise have spent.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): Does my hon. Friend agree that someone who has made no provision might even be better off, because he will receive housing benefit and council tax benefit?

Mr. Duncan Smith: There is no question but that my hon. Friend is right. The point is that anyone on the margins, with below-average income, who tries to save—perhaps putting away 10 per cent. of their income every year—will say, "I am losing that from my yearly spend and the bloke two doors down the road is having a wonderful time, travelling to Virginia and being dumped off the aircraft. One way or another, he is having a wonderful time, and he will receive the same income as I will."

Ms Stuart *rose—*

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley) *rose—*

Dr. George Turner *rose—*

Mr. Duncan Smith: No, in a minute.

The Government have collective amnesia. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has clearly forgotten his 1993 pledge, when he said:

"I want the next Labour Government to achieve what in 50 years of the welfare state has never been achieved. The end of the means test for elderly people."

A few years ago, he made that bold pledge, but the reality is exactly the opposite.

The second fault in the Green Paper is its attitude towards, and its attack on, occupational pensions. I began my speech with a reference to how occupational pensions have been hurt by the Government. The Green Paper states:

"Occupational pension schemes are the great welfare success story of this country."

Hear, hear. They were, but, under this Government, they are not.

The Government's proposals for stakeholder pensions are more than likely to discourage employers from setting up such schemes in the future. There is also a serious danger that some employers will close occupational schemes to new entrants and simply offer access to stakeholder funds instead.

The National Association of Pension Funds today said:

"Smaller companies will see it as easier and cheaper for them to encourage employees to move into stakeholder arrangements instead of creating occupational pensions."

The proposals in the Green Paper will increase the regulatory and cost burden on employers of maintaining salary-related schemes.

The Green Paper says:

"Our proposals to create a framework for stakeholder pension schemes are not intended to change the commitment that employers already have to providing occupational pension schemes."

Yet, the Government's proposals are, frankly, a stake through the heart of salary-related occupational schemes. On the one hand, the Government attacked them through the dividend tax credit, then they dealt them a blow through the rebate, and now they are dealing them a blow in the Green Paper. It is a blow which they will not survive, and for which the Government will stand condemned.

Kali Mountford: The hon. Gentleman makes much of occupational pension schemes, but why, in 1988, did the Conservative Government encourage people into private pension schemes that were not properly regulated and that failed thousands of pensioners in Britain?

Mr. Duncan Smith: What a wonderful intervention from the daily notes yet again—as though that were a real surprise. The previous Government set out to deal with the problem and this Government have continued that action. No hon. Member would think such mis-selling acceptable. The hon. Lady should be careful. I am about to come to what will be the biggest mis-selling scam of the lot, which is in the Green Paper. She should keep quiet for a little and listen because the reality is that she will be thoroughly ashamed of her Government who have set out to defraud the electorate.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Duncan Smith: No, not just yet. The hon. Gentleman has had his moment in the sun and that is good enough for him.

The Government have made much about reducing the need for individuals to seek financial advice, so let us move on to the concept of mis-selling in terms of the Government's proposals. The Green Paper's stakeholder proposal lies at the heart of a serious problem as to whether the public, the consumer, will take the right product.

The Government will recommend their product. In encouraging future pensioners to join those cost access terms schemes, which could turn out to be neither the best nor the cheapest investment or, critically, no better than the previous arrangement, the Government will rightly stand accused of mis-selling pensions on a grand scale. Unless the Government are prepared to step forward right now and underwrite their value, which I doubt, future Governments will have to suffer because this Government seem to have learnt nothing from what the hon. Lady has just referred to. The mis-selling to which she has just referred will become small beer in comparison with what the Government are likely to set in train—a huge problem, of which others will have to pick up the pieces. That confusion is the mother and father of mis-selling.

Peter Murray, the chairman of the NAPF, rightly said:

"This means confusion for the man in the street and when the consumer is confused, it means misselling on a large scale is inevitable."

The Government will then stand accused, but, more than likely, they will have lost the election. They will be out and someone else will have to pick up the pieces.

The fourth problem strikes right at the heart of the real divide that exists in Government, and it concerns the Government's culture. The Government's ill-thought-through plans in the Green Paper are likely to lead to greater confusion and result in pensioners finding that they are worse off in due course than if no change had been made at all. Particularly badly hit will be anyone who saves on the margins.

Whether the new product is called a lifelong individual savings account, and whether "pension" is substituted for "lifelong", at its heart is the real problem. Almost every commentator now believes that LISAs demonstrate how the Government are pursuing two clear and different agendas in two different Departments. *The Times* of 27 January stated:

"Two departments are trying to run the show instead of one."

The scheme was put forward by the Association of Unit Trusts and Investment Funds. I know that the association was working up this scheme for some time before the Government took office, and it approached the Treasury to discuss it. It is only recently that the Treasury has finally decided to go ahead, and I understand that it was the Treasury that set about leaking the details in the past couple of weeks to bounce the Department of Social Security and force its hand on the matter.

In the middle of all this, we announce our Opposition day debate on pensions, and the Department of Social Security goes into a spin. *[Interruption.]* I know what the Secretary of State for Social Security is looking for. He is looking for a reference in the document that I have here. It is in fact a rather obscure, vague reference, which says nothing about how the scheme is to operate. We know that it was dropped in by the Treasury; the Secretary of State had no option because the Treasury is running the show.

Knowing that we were to have this debate on pensions, the Department of Social Security went into a spin. The Secretary of State then went charging across to the Treasury and said, "Quick, I don't want to do this debate if they're going to accuse me of having a hidden policy that the Treasury may produce."

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): Does my hon. Friend agree that the LISA scheme being proposed by the Government is very similar to the 401K scheme in the United States, which has been shown to damage pension fund provision?

Mr. Duncan Smith: My hon. Friend is quite right; there are many similarities between the proposed scheme and the 401K. I shall touch on them in a moment if he will bear with me.

The point is that the two Departments are at odds with each other. To try to avoid the split, the Secretary of State for Social Security has decided to get in on the act—

Ms Stuart *rose—*

Mr. Duncan Smith: The hon. Lady has already had her opportunity but she missed it; she is not going to get a second chance.

In order to save face, the Secretary of State has persuaded the Treasury to allow his name to appear with that of the Chief Secretary in the written answer. The fact that the policy has been worked up away from the Department of Social Security is a clear sign that the Treasury has long since decided that it will take over pensions from the Department of Social Security.

We have here a little advance notice of that. I was concerned. I see the Secretary of State sitting there; he clearly assumes that he is going to lead for the Government in this debate and is going to put the Government's case. He is in charge because he is sitting there. However, the Government amendment to the motion is tabled in the name of "The Prime Minister, Mr. Secretary Prescott, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer"—we have heard of him—"Mr. Secretary Cook, Mr. Secretary Straw and Mr. Secretary Blunkett". Where is the Secretary of State for Social Security? Clearly, those further along the Front Bench are trying to send him a message that he has not got yet. I am surprised; it is a very unfortunate way of doing things. Perhaps they should have told him direct that it is a case of "Move over, Darling." I would be much kinder to him and tell him to his face.

The proposals will lead to chaos. The policy worked up by the Association of Unit Trusts and Pension Funds is an interesting one which has some things to recommend it, although there may be problems with it. The problem is not the policy but the framework set up by the Department into which the policy drops and with which it clashes.

For example, the stakeholder scheme is meant to be cheap and it makes no allowance for advice in order to keep costs down. However, the arrival of that alternative scheme means that anyone who has to make decisions about long-term savings will be confused as to what to do

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and will need advice but will have to pay for it. In fact, the Secretary of State should talk to his Minister of State who, in *The Daily Telegraph* on Saturday, said quite clearly:

"I would expect the cost of advice to be met by the individual who uses it."

There we have it—the hidden cost. Those seeking advice will have to pay; if they do not, they will be mis-sold something that may be of absolutely no use to them.

The scheme is a pensions vehicle that runs counter to the Green Paper on stakeholder pensions. There is no commonality. The stakeholder pension scheme has at its heart trustees; LISAs do not. What is an ordinary member of the public to make of it? I listened to the Secretary of State on the radio and I heard John Humphrys say that he could not understand a word that the right hon. Gentleman was saying. I admit that I agreed with John Humphrys.

The financial page of *The Times*, a newspaper not known for its failure to understand financial issues, wrote:

"instead potential savers will be confronted with a mindboggling complexity. Anyone on a modest income who has not passed exams as a financial adviser is likely to bury their head in despair."

Remember, this is the Government who brought us the Green Paper on the stakeholder scheme, telling us that they would cut the cost of advice. That will not happen if the Minister of State gets his way.

David Dunne, the head of production development at NPL, summed up the matter when, conclusively, he said:

"I don't see how this can be anything other than a rival to stakeholder pensions but without the trustees. It is certainly confusing. Both will be in effect Government approved bench marked products with low charges and alongside them you will have ISAs . . . with the customer asking—which is right for me? And that is the point at which advice will be required when one of the features of these proposals had been to get rid of the need for advice and its expense."

Instead, quietly, the Government will make people pay. That is what the Government do not tell people, although they squeeze them none the less.

The Government set out with very big words on their return to office. We were told that they would complete the reform of pensions, delivering a simpler and better system than that which now exists. Instead, we have seen from the Government a disastrous conflict. The Chancellor of the Exchequer's megalomania means that, bit by bit, he wants to take over the whole of government and, increasingly, chaos and a disincentive to save are the results of the Government's policies.

As I have said, the tremendous shift towards a more means-tested system will act as a disincentive to save and will drive more and more people into the means-test trap. It will work against savings for pensions in future. That will be compounded by the ridiculously complex structure that the Government have set up, which will lead to confusion. That confusion will dissuade people from entering the market, especially as they will have to engage advisers at their own expense.

What is worse is that, because the Government now have a series of savings vehicles that carry the stamp of Government approval, and in the absence of any serious advice, they will find that the public will say, "Were we not mis-sold this? Did the Government not suggest to us that this was the best route for us? Did our companies not say to us that there was nothing that they could do because the Government had said, 'This is where they shall go'?" Given the investment platform that existed when the Government took office, the lack of constructive and, most of all, joined-up thinking places in jeopardy the investment pattern.

There is still nothing from the Government on the remarkably important problem of annuities. The falling value of annuities goes right to the heart of pension provision, but there is complete silence from the Government. Pensioners know that that is the problem for them when it comes to their investment income. We are talking of what will be seen in years to come as the greatest missed opportunity of any Government since the war. They have shirked the tough decisions and they have fiddled. As a result, they have created a pensions regime that will undermine the future retirement incomes of millions of people. It will be for us to make it clear that the alternative is a Government who are prepared to take tough decisions and an Opposition who will knock the present Government out of power, such as the present Opposition.

4.13 pm

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"commends the Government's approach to pensions reform, set out in its Green Paper, Partnership in Pensions; congratulates the Government on its determination to end the scandal of pensions mis-selling and its plans to strengthen the financial regulatory system; commends the Government on its commitment to economic stability and low inflation, which helps pensioners; believes that its reforms to the corporate tax system, which will result in the lowest-ever rate of Corporation Tax, will be in the long-term interests of companies, shareholders and pensioners; and approves of the Government's introduction of the Minimum Pension Guarantee, Winter Fuel Payments, the re-introduction of free eye tests and commitment to concessionary travel for the elderly as part of its strategy to provide security in retirement."

The final flourish of the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) would have had a little more strength behind it if, in 18 years of power, the Conservative Government had done anything about reforming the pension system. It is remarkable that, in the 35 minutes or so that the hon. Gentleman spoke, he said not one word about the Conservatives' flagship policy for reforming pensions—basic pension plus. He said not one word about it.

We remember that that policy was launched shortly before the general election. We were told that it would be the blueprint for the future. Yet not one word was said about it by the hon. Gentleman this afternoon. Instead, he said that he would be working out Conservative pension policy at the appropriate time. All I can say is that it is just as well that he will have considerable time in which to work out that alternative. On the basis of what he has said this afternoon, I conclude that he has not a clue about what to do on pension reform.

The House will recall that basic pension plus would have cost £150 billion for effectively privatising the entire pension system. That money would have been spent on privatisation rather than on pensioners, and, as a result, many pensioners would have had to rely on the very means test that the hon. Gentleman criticised.

The Conservatives have no policies, so I shall outline the Government's policies and reply to some of the points that the Opposition have made. Our objective is to ensure that as many people as possible who can save do save, and to give them the options to do that.

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): The Secretary of State said that the Conservatives had introduced no pension reforms but perhaps he has forgotten that they reformed the state earnings-related pension scheme. As I understand it, the effect of that reform is that, if somebody's husband died on 5 April next year, she would get an average widow's pension of about £33, but, if he died on 6 April, she would receive an average of only £12.

Mr. Darling: The previous Government greatly altered the original intention of SERPS and at the time gave no indication that they were about to do so. We propose further reforms to SERPS, which I shall refer to in a moment, that will be of far greater benefit to people on lower incomes.

I want to emphasise two points that the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green made light of. We inherited not only one but two pensions scandals. The first, obviously, was the mis-selling of pensions, which the hon. Gentleman glibly brushed aside, saying, "Oh, we know about that." Two and a half million people certainly know about that. Ten years ago, we all remember the scandal of Government-sponsored advertisements, which showed a man breaking out of a straitjacket, when the Conservatives tried to tell us that the very act of going private was both spiritually and, of course, materially enriching.

The truth is that 2.5 million people were mis-sold pensions. When we came into office in May 1997, absolutely nothing had been done to clear up that mess. It took our efforts—principally those of the former Economic Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Mrs. Liddell), who did sterling work—to convince the pensions industry that it had to clear up the mess and restore the public's trust in it. We got absolutely no help from the Conservatives, whose Government had created that problem.

The second problem that we inherited, which is the root cause of the problems that we face for the future, is that, unless we change our pensions policy as we propose to do, a third of people now working will retire on means-tested benefits. The hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green was complaining about the means test and making much of it. He ignores the fact that, during the 18 years in which the Conservatives were in power, means-tested benefits rose from about 16 per cent. of all benefits to 34 per cent. In other words, for all his rhetoric, the Conservatives more than doubled the application of means-tested benefits.

The real scandal is that, if we do not change direction, a third of people now working will retire on benefit. We do not consider that acceptable—

Mr. Butterfill: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Darling: In a moment.

For that reason, we decided that pensions policy needed to change and put forward our proposals in the Green Paper last year.

Mr. Butterfill: I am most grateful to the Secretary of State. Of course we are all concerned about those who will retire on means-tested benefits, but we are also very concerned—as I hope that he is—about those who have an expectation of a reasonable pension but whose annuity will buy them a low income, given the current low rates of annuities. The Secretary of State proposes LISAs, which will allow people to save and retain their capital. Will he reconsider removing the inhibitions placed on those with personal pensions who must buy an annuity at certain times and at the present appalling rates, which are depressed by his Government's action, and give those people the freedom to make a wider range of investments? They might do better and the Treasury might benefit from inheritance tax in the end.

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman will know that a discretion is now exercised concerning when someone must buy an annuity. He will also be aware that the Government give tax relief to people to make pension provision because—there is cross-party consensus on this—it is right to encourage people to do so. We must watch, however, that the tax relief that we provide cannot be used to save for purposes other than pensions. The matter of low annuity rates has been raised on several occasions. Yes, they have fallen, but that is a consequence of lower interest rates and lower inflation. I firmly believe—I hope that the hon. Gentleman does not dissent from this—that one of the best things that any Government can do for pensioners is ensure a stable economic background and low inflation. For people on fixed incomes for 20 or 30 years, low inflation is central to helping them enjoy a decent standard of living. I make no apology for being part of a Government for whom that is a central objective.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Darling: I will in a moment. I am very conscious of the fact that this is a three-hour debate, and I want to deal with the Conservative Opposition's point about the abolition of advance corporation tax and tax credits.

The central objective behind these abolitions was to help companies' profitability. The House will be aware that, as a result of removing tax credits, we have been able to cut corporation tax to its lowest-ever level. That will help companies' profitability and therefore benefit investors. Some of the biggest investors in this country are pension funds. Increased company profitability benefits pension funds. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) can squawk as much as she wants, but the fact is that, if we leave companies with more money due to a reduced tax burden, they can decide whether to distribute or reinvest the profits.

It is interesting that no serious commentator is calling on us to reverse this tax change. Most people believe that it was the right one to make. When the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green was tackled on that point by my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours), the hon. Gentleman could not say what the Conservatives would do. Will his reaction be the same as that to the working families tax credit, which the Conservatives have pledged to reverse, resulting in a tax increase for some of the poorest people of £17 a week? Are we to hear yet another pledge, along with the one to remove the independence of the Bank of England? Corporate Britain would be dismayed if that

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were the stated objective of the Conservative party. The tax changes that we have made will benefit companies and shareholders and therefore pensioners. That is the right thing to do in the long-term economic interests of the country.

Mr. Duncan Smith: What does the right hon. Gentleman say to representatives of funds that have declared that they are now worse off directly as a result of the Government's policy? They should be given an answer instead of lectures from the right hon. Gentleman about what he thinks they ought to be doing.

Mr. Darling: I have of course spoken to many pension fund managers and companies. When they are asked whether they would like us to reverse that tax change, they all say no, because they understand that it was the right thing to do in the long term. This Government, unlike the previous one, have always taken the view that we should act in the long-term interests of the country.

I note in passing that pension funds performed well in 1998; returns averaged about 14 per cent.

Mr. Duncan Smith: No thanks to this Government.

Mr. Darling: Pension funds have done so well precisely thanks to the economic environment that we are creating.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Darling: No, not just now. Knowing the hon. Gentleman, he will want to speak at great length when he replies on behalf of the Opposition. We look forward to listening to him then.

I want to set out our approach to pensions reform. We firmly believe that everyone who can save ought to save. We want to give people the flexibility, the choice and the incentives to do so. A one-size-fits-all approach to pensions will not do; everyone has different requirements. There have been huge labour market changes. In the past, many people had access to occupational pension funds, which are extremely good options for those who are lucky enough to be able to take advantage of them. As the House well knows, however, many people do not have that option. Although personal pensions are certainly a good option for some, they are not so, as we know only too well, for low-paid people or even for some moderate earners.

We believed that, if we were to encourage more people to make provision for themselves, it was necessary to add to occupational and personal pensions, filling a gap. That is why we have introduced the new stakeholder pension scheme. That development was widely welcomed, as was the entire Green Paper, and it remains the case that most people recognise that there is sense in the Government's position.

We have taken a pragmatic approach, recognising that, for people on a low income, there must be an element of redistribution, and that that is best done by the state. That is why we have introduced the state second pension. We believe that moderate and higher earners are better off in funded pensions, but obviously there needed to be further options available to them because, increasingly, people work for smaller firms that do not have access to occupational pensions, and some people move around a lot more than was usual in the past. We have developed the extra options now available in stakeholder pensions for those very people.

We are ensuring that a range of options—occupational, stakeholder and private pensions—is available to people in this country, so that they have no excuse not to make provision for themselves in retirement, if they can afford to do so. We believe that that is a step-change in attitude on pension provision.

Mr. Burnett: The Secretary of State has recently talked about incentives, but earlier he said that it was common ground that tax relief should remain for pension provision. Does that mean that he acknowledges that it is common ground that tax relief at the higher rate should remain for pension provision?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman will know that the Government have set out the tax relief available for the stakeholder pension and for other pensions. The Government obviously need to consider that from time to time, but I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is absolutely necessary to give people proper incentives to save for their retirement. We are determined to give them such incentives.

The big problem that we faced in this country was that far too many people who could save were not saving, and one problem was that there were not enough options available to them. That is why we introduced stakeholder pensions. I believe that most people think that our approach, building on the developments of the past few decades, is right.

The basic state pension will remain in place. It will increase in line with prices, as we undertook in our manifesto, and it will still account for a significant proportion of pensioner incomes for a considerable time to come. Yes, we have introduced a new minimum income guarantee, and I do not apologise for a minute for having done so. I believe that there is a basic level of decency on which people should retire—and if that is a difference between the Labour Government and the Tory party, so be it. We want people to do better.

I do not accept for a minute the glib argument that people would prefer to live on benefit than on a pension for which they have saved during their working life. If people save and build up a pension, they will always be better off than they would be on benefit. If we were to follow the argument used by the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green to its logical conclusion—if we did not provide a minimum pension guarantee and did not uprate that support in line with earnings—those people who were unfortunate enough not to have saved would be left with a lower and lower income. If the hon. Gentleman is really saying that only the threat of destitution will make people save—which was Tory philosophy in 1980—I am afraid that I do not agree with him. I believe that society has certain basic obligations. The scheme that we have introduced is designed to ensure that as many people as possible do not rely on that minimum pension guarantee, but do better than that.

Let me first consider the position of low earners—people earning about £9,000 a year or less. The problem is that, because SERPS is income related, a person earning about £6,000 a year would receive a pension of about £13 a week. By replacing SERPS with a new state second pension, we have doubled the rate at which a person accrues his pension at the lower end, so that the same person would receive about £46 a week—£33 a week extra. That approach has been welcomed not only by a majority of Members of Parliament, but by the industry, which recognises that people on lower incomes are far better off in a scheme under which they contribute to the state. It is recognised that that is better than trying to force those people into a funded scheme, as the Tories wanted to do, which would be manifestly unsuitable.

Mr. Quentin Davies: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Darling: In a moment.

The House will also recall that, for the first time ever, we have brought into the state second pension 2.5 million carers who were excluded from it. Over time, that will give some of them, after a lifetime's caring, about £50 a week. I believe that that change alone is worthy of support, but we have gone further.

We are ensuring that people on lifetime low earnings will be better off as a result of our reforms. They will be able to accrue a decent pension during their working life, thereby putting an end to the scandal of people working all their life, saving hard all their life and still ending up on benefit. We want to ensure that people who work and save throughout their life retire on a decent income, which they have earned, which they can see building up year after year, and to which they can add.

Mr. Sutcliffe: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) has been champing at the bit; I shall give way to him and to my hon. Friend in a moment.

That firm basis—the basic state pension and the state second pension—is the right foundation. I shall deal in a moment with the help that we are giving to moderate and higher earners to ensure that they, too, make adequate provision for themselves.

Mr. Davies: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. Will he try to get into the good habit of giving the House the full picture, not just half the picture? He said that, under the Government's proposals, the rate of accrual for SERPS for those earning less than £9,000 a year will double. Will he add, as it is a fact that he has not yet mentioned, that the rate of accrual for those earning between £9,000 and £18,500 will be halved?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman is wrong about that. I noticed that he said the same thing a few days ago in an interview for a magazine. My hon. Friend the Minister of State has replied to that charge. The hon. Gentleman should read my hon. Friend's response; he will find that he is quite wrong about that.

Mr. Sutcliffe: My right hon. Friend has identified the key difference between the Government and the Opposition on the carers pension and the poorest pensioners. We held a review and consulted all sorts of groups, involving them in plans for the carers pension. Does not the difference lie in the fact that we listen to people, and the Opposition do not?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The Government considered their pension reform long and hard. When I was appointed as Secretary of State, of course I looked at everything that the Department was doing, including pensions. As I said to the House during Question Time, if there was any delay, part of it was caused by me because I wanted to satisfy myself that our approach was absolutely correct.

I shall deal with the point raised by the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green on the radio this morning. By sheer good fortune, when the Treasury was working up the scheme to which he referred, I happened to be Chief Secretary to the Treasury, and I also happened to be responsible for that part of the Treasury, so I knew about it and I encouraged the work because I was enthusiastic about it. Then, by another stroke of good fortune, I became Secretary of State for Social Security. To complete that good fortune, I still hold the same views as I held when I was Chief Secretary. I was thus able to bring all the strands together into a coherent, sensible pensions strategy, which I believe people will welcome.

The ways in which we can help moderate and high earners to improve their pension prospects are relevant to the comments of the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford. We believe that people on moderate earnings, as well as those on higher earnings, are far better off in funded schemes. The advantage of the state second pension, as the Green Paper makes clear, is that, if people go into a funded scheme, they can take the rebates with them, which will give them a good boost for their funded pension.

Again, that has been widely welcomed by the industry. I find it difficult to understand how Conservative Members can oppose that. I thought that they believed in the partnership between state, private individuals and the insurance sector. We want them to work together. People recognise that our arrangements will enable those on moderate earnings to be far better off than they would otherwise be.

As I said earlier, we identified the obvious fact that, as labour market conditions change, the pensions options need to be extended. That is why we have introduced stakeholder pension schemes.

I repeat the point that I made on the radio this morning, because the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green was wrong about it then. It has always been the Government's view that people should seek advice before they make pension arrangements. Buying a pension is far more important than buying a house. It is probably one of the most important decisions that people will take throughout their working life. They would be wise to take advice, as the history of the matter shows. No one should be in any doubt about that.

The stakeholder pension provides options that did not previously exist.

The Green Paper makes it clear that we will legislate to provide for trustee-based stakeholder pension schemes. Those schemes will be designed primarily for people who work for small employers who do not have their own

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occupational scheme or for circumstances in which employers or another affinity group come together to provide an umbrella scheme for employees. In other words, it will offer benefits that are similar to those in occupational schemes, something that is not possible at present.

We have also provided a new option, and the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green made great play of the fact that we had thought it up a mere moment ago. I know for a fact that we did not, because I was a Treasury Minister when it was being worked up. I refer the hon. Gentleman to paragraph 39 on page 55 of the pensions Green Paper—which I am pretty sure that he had never read until he heard me mention it on the radio this morning. *[Interruption.]* He admits it. That is why he was wrong on this point. Paragraph 39 is quite a long paragraph, which states in pretty stark terms that the Government intended to publish the proposals that have been published this afternoon. I knew that the announcement was coming when I published the Green Paper in December. Therefore, no one should be surprised that the Government are delivering on a promise that they made about six weeks ago.

The hon. Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill)—who is no longer in the Chamber—said that he thought that the measure is similar to section 401k of the American scheme. That is not quite right. As I understand it, under that section, saving schemes in America can be drawn down at any time. I make it absolutely clear that the new scheme that was announced today will not be in competition with the other stakeholder model partly because it is a pensions vehicle. It is not possible to get tax relief for pensions and then take out the money in advance of a pension. That would clearly be wrong.

The new scheme addresses a particular need. The Conservatives sometimes claim to be in touch with the City—indeed, it looks as though many Conservative Members have returned there to earn a bob or two before the offices close. Many people, who move from job to job and take a far keener interest in their investments than was the case 20 or 30 years ago, want to be able to invest in unit trusts and open-ended investment companies and so on and build up a fund for their pension, which they can adjust from time to time as fund performance changes. I think that there is everything to be said for encouraging people to do that. As I have said on numerous occasions, it must be right for the Government to ask what is changing in the financial services market, how labour conditions are changing and what we can do to ensure that people have as many options to save as possible.

Hon. Members will recall that, in my statement of 15 December, I made it clear that the Government are considering the position of the self-employed and whether they should be compelled to save for their pensions. Part of the present problem is that the choice is between occupational pensions, which the self-employed clearly cannot join; and private pensions, which are not suitable for many people. The more options we provide, the easier it will be for us to be blunt with people and say, "Look, if you want a decent income for your retirement, you must save; you can't expect the state to stand behind you."

That is why I want to ensure that people have options. Some people will save for their pensions through unconventional means—for example, through their businesses or their houses if they are fortunate enough to live in an area of the country where that is possible. Above all, the Government must ensure that people have a range of options. We must increase flexibility to ensure that as many people as possible save. That is our objective: we want people to save more, invest more and to ensure that they can provide for themselves adequately in their retirement.

That is the Government's strategy, which was set out clearly in the Green Paper, "Partnership in Pensions", which we published last December. Today's consultation document adds to that. It is very clear: we are telling people to do the best that they can for their retirement. We are certain that a one-size-fits-all approach to pensions will not do. We must give people more options than they have at present—between occupational pensions and personal private pensions—which is why we introduced the stakeholder pension. We have responded to changing labour market conditions and to a greater sense of awareness among some investors. We want to provide an additional option that will allow people to accumulate sums for their retirement. That is an essential part of any pensions strategy. I repeat that the Green Paper was widely welcomed upon its publication last year. I readily accept that, if people run around for long enough, and prod people enough, they can get someone to grunt and say that they have an odd complaint, but the Green Paper has been widely welcomed because its proposals are right, pragmatic and workable.

On top of that, people should remember that the Government are committed to rebuilding trust in pensions overall by strengthening the financial services industry and regulating it. We are also introducing a new annual pensions statement, which will mean that people will know how they stand for their retirement. Again, that initiative has been widely welcomed.

It is evident from the debate that the Conservatives's attack is completely ill-conceived—their spokesmen give the distinct impression that they have not yet read the Green Paper, even though it was published almost two months ago—and it is abundantly obvious that they have no new ideas of their own. In their defence, however, they plead that they have lots of time to think up some ideas. It looks as though they are committed to repealing the tax changes that we made, which have resulted in the lowest corporation tax for two years. In short, they have absolutely nothing to say on pensions, just as it appears that they have nothing to say about most other matters that concern people.

We are helping today's pensioners. We are clearing up the mess that we inherited from the previous Government. We are building long-term stability. We have established a stable economic regime, which will benefit pensioners and companies and their shareholders alike. We have a long-term pensions strategy, where a lifetime's work and saving is rewarded with a decent pension. I commend the amendment to the House.

Mr. Quentin Davies: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I know the Secretary of State sufficiently well to know that he would not set out deliberately to mislead

the House, but his answer to my intervention was quite inconsistent with page 45 of his own document. I think that—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I do not think that that can be a point of order, if it is a point of debate. There will, no doubt, be an opportunity to make that point in the debate, if the hon. Gentleman succeeds in catching my eye.

Mr. Davies: It is a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because I thought that it might be in the interest of the integrity of the debate if the right hon. Gentleman had an opportunity to catch your eye again to put the record straight.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: It is not a point of order; it is a point of debate and a point of information. I have no doubt that it can be put on the record in the normal way.

4.42 pm

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): I note with interest that the Conservatives chose to debate Labour's policy on pensions. I regret that they did not choose to debate Conservative policy on pensions, because we could all have been home by tea.

So far as I can see, there is only one Conservative policy on pensions, which is to be against what they used to be in favour of—means-testing. There is plenty of meat in Labour's pension policy, and I shall address it in three aspects: first, the Government's record to date on pensioners; secondly, what is promised for the rest of the Parliament; and, thirdly, the longer term, of which there has been some discussion already.

The Government have much to be modest about in their record so far. When the Secretary of State made a statement to the House before Christmas, he said:

"Under the new Labour Government, Britain's pensioners are £140 a year or more better off".—[*Official Report*, 15 December 1998; Vol. 322, c. 761.]

I, with a little help from my friends, describe that as Arthur Daley economics, which shows how long it is since we all watched television regularly.

That figure of £140 a year does not bear much close scrutiny, because it comprises two elements: £40 from lower fuel bills, and £50 for winter fuel payments for people on income support this year and £50 for them next year. If I am not mistaken, the Secretary of State said "£140 a year", but he has counted the £50 twice. If a constituent said, "I hear that you are getting a £4,000 pay rise," a Member of Parliament would reply, "No, it's going to be only £2,000." If the constituent then said, "Ah yes, but I am counting next year's as well," one might feel a bit aggrieved. It is rather dodgy to include the same figure twice.

What have the Government achieved so far for pensioners, through the measures that they have taken? The Government's proudest boast is that they have done two things for pensioners. First, they have cut the rate of value added tax on fuel. We supported that, but what is it worth, on average, to pensioners? My hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) tabled a written question asking what the cut in VAT on fuel from 8 to 5 per cent. would save an average pensioner household. The answer came back, 35p a week.

It gets worse, because the Government cunningly introduced that in August so that it would be reflected in the September retail prices index, which meant that, when pensions went up, they would go up by less than they would otherwise have done. When that factor is taken into account, the written answer says, the average gain to pensioner households from that VAT cut is 20p a week. If pensioners were to save that money for a month, they could buy a lottery ticket, so it is worth having.

Mr. Sutcliffe: In opposition, we prevented the Conservative Government from putting VAT on fuel up to 17.5 per cent., so the saving is double the amount to which the hon. Gentleman refers.

Mr. Webb: The Liberal Democrats supported attempts to prevent the Conservatives from putting VAT on fuel up to 17.5 per cent. However, the Labour Government's record should start on the day of the general election, so I am measuring from that point.

The 20p saving from the reduction in VAT on fuel is welcome but not exactly a king's ransom. What about the winter fuel payments? The Government are spending roughly £200 million on winter fuel payments and there are about 10 million pensioners, so that is £20 a head, or 40p a week. In total, the savings are 20p on VAT on fuel and 40p on winter fuel, which makes 60p a week compared with the Secretary of State's grotesque exaggeration of £140 a year.

I offer the following comment, to be sympathetic and to help the Government. I genuinely believe that, if they go on exaggerating their achievements, when people come up against reality and realise that it does not measure up, they will be disappointed. Rather than give the Government credit for having provided £20 for winter fuel and for having reduced VAT on fuel, they will say, "You have been going around saying that the saving is £140 a year, yet I am not better off by anything like that amount."

The Government will raise expectations if they overstate their case by saying that they are spending £20 billion on health and £19 billion on education, when those sums represent three years added together and all the numbers have been counted twice. People will be disappointed, and that will damage the Government. In a spirit of conciliation and friendship, I urge them to give more accurate figures.

I asked how much it costs to administer the one-off winter fuel payments, and the answer was £12 million. Could that 40p a week not have gone on the pension? I asked how much that would cost to administer, and the answer was nil, so £12 million has been wasted for a few winter headlines.

This policy is patronising to pensioners. Do the Government think that pensioners cannot be trusted to put by 40p a week for their winter fuel bills, and that they must have it in a one-off payment otherwise they may spend it? This is not a sensible way to proceed.

Mr. Rendel: Does my hon. Friend agree that winter fuel payments are unlikely to be made at exactly the

[Mr. Rendel]

moment when pensioners receive their winter fuel bills? The Government are not even being clever by helping pensioners at the right moment.

Mr. Webb: My hon. Friend is right. When the Government first introduced this policy, many of the payments arrived well into what one would unambiguously call spring.

The Secretary of State tried to defend the £140 a year figure last Thursday when we discussed the operating orders, but he realised that he was on a sticky wicket. The right hon. Gentleman said, "What does the hon. Gentleman know? Pensioners do not smoke like a chimney, so we cannot count the effect of tobacco taxes. Pensioners do not drive as much as other people, so we should not count the effect of petrol tax rises. Pensioners tend not to have private medical insurance, so we should not count that." That attitude is utterly patronising to pensioners. Most of the 10 million or so pensioners are fit and able, and contribute fully to society. Many of them, heaven forbid, have cars and drive. The effect on them of the petrol tax rise is very real, and the Secretary of State should not disregard it.

To arrive at that figure of £140 a year, the Government counted two beneficial items and exaggerated them. They should be set against the tax increases on petrol and tobacco and the abolition of the dividend tax credit, which we debated a few weeks ago. During that debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) challenged the Economic Secretary. He argued that poorish, non-taxpaying pensioners with dividend income will lose on average up to £75 a year. The response he was given was that the Government have introduced an income guarantee for those pensioners. My hon. Friend said, "Yes, but many of them will be disqualified because they have savings." "No, they won't," said the Economic Secretary, "because they won't have that much in capital."

To discover the truth, I tabled a question to the Department of Social Security—unlike the Treasury, the DSS still answers questions—which said that, out of the 300,000 non-taxpaying pensioners with dividend income, 250,000 would be disqualified from the guarantee because they have savings of more than £8,000. The Economic Secretary was wrong, and gave the House an inaccurate impression, inadvertently I am sure. Large numbers of people will lose out, because they will not be covered by the guarantee. The Government's record so far is modest in the extreme and has been grotesquely overstated.

What about the future? When my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) challenged the Prime Minister during last week's Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister made a fatal mistake. He mistook a Government announcement for reality. He said:

"In addition to the things . . . that I mentioned a moment ago"—

the fuel payments and the VAT cut—

"from April this year, there will be . . . concessionary travel."—[*Official Report*, 27 January 1999; Vol. 324, c. 338.]

Everyone understood him to mean a national system of concessionary travel for pensioners, as proposed by the Deputy Prime Minister. However, although a scheme has been announced, it will not happen this year. It might happen next year. Pensioners hear such announcements or read about them in the newspapers and, bizarrely, they believe them. To give another example, I met a group of pensioners recently and one of them said, "I see in the newspaper that we are going to get free television licences, so I am going to stop buying licence stamps." I had to say in reply, "No, you might get free television licences next year or the year after, but not yet. The Government wanted a few good headlines, but I am afraid that it will not happen for a while."

The Government love to announce and reannounce things. The 10p tax rate is a classic example—I have lost track of the number of times that has been announced. People believe such announcements.

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): On the point about making announcements that people do not believe, is the hon. Gentleman still standing by his party's pledge to spend £28 billion on increasing the personal income tax allowance from £4,100 to £10,000?

Mr. Webb: Many pensioners would welcome a significant increase in the personal income tax allowance, because, at the moment, it is barely above the level of income support. That is extraordinarily low for pensioners and should be increased. The hon. Gentleman asked about our long-term goal, over the course of two Parliaments, of raising tax allowances to £10,000. I used to work for the humble Institute for Fiscal Studies, which has received much praise this afternoon. The first thing I did as an employee of that institute was to examine Conservative allegations that the Labour party would spend £28 billion—strangely enough, it was the same figure—which was calculated by adding together everything it had ever said it wanted to do and assuming that everything would be done in one go in one Parliament. That was absurd. The hon. Gentleman's party regarded it as absurd then and his question is an absurd way to approach matters, too.

The issue of means testing is central. At this point, I wish to introduce the House to my father-in-law. When I see him, he asks me one question.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): Why are you in the Liberal Democrats?

Mr. Webb: Apart from that, he asks me what the point was of saving his money when the person next door gets everything for nothing. He suggested that I should find out how much someone would have to save to match the level of means-tested benefits.

I tabled a question to the Department of Social Security asking what someone would have to have in a pension pot to buy the extra benefits that people on income support receive over and above the basic state pension. They get an extra tenner a week in cash, some £2,000 a year on average in housing benefit, council tax benefit, free dentistry and so on. The answer was that it would cost £41,000 to buy an annuity to match those additional benefits. That means that there is almost no point in people saving £20,000, but if they can save £40,000 they can buy an annuity to provide all the same goodies that someone on income support gets.

The last thing that I am suggesting is that people on income support are well off, but we want to encourage people to save and the over-reliance on means-tested

benefits discourages them. I was shocked to learn that the value of the additional benefits was equivalent to a £41,000 pension pot.

What should the Government have done and what could they do in future? First, they could provide a firm foundation for the basic state pension, not a foundation of sinking sand. By that, I mean that it should rise with age. The poorest pensioners in the land are not the ones entitled to, and getting, income support: they are those who are entitled to income support but are not getting it. The hon. Member for Colne Valley (Kali Mountford) nods, because she is aware that the Government are trying to pay income support to more people. I welcome that, but the Government assume in their costing supplied in written answers that 15 per cent. of those entitled to the so-called guarantee will not get it. That means that hundreds of thousands of pensioners will not get a penny from the so-called guarantee. Most of them are over 75 or 80 and would get every penny of the basic state pension for older pensioners. That is why we want a firm foundation for the basic pension. Even a modest rise of £5 for the over-80s and £3 for the over-75s would guarantee putting 40,000 or 50,000 pensioners above the poverty line.

What can we say of the Government's long-term policies? We need a firmly founded basic pension. The Secretary of State said that, under his policies, adding together the basic pension and the state second pension, we will bring people up to the target minimum of about 20 per cent. of average earnings. That is true in the year in which those people retire, but what happens the next year? We do not know how the state second pension will be indexed but, while the basic pension will be linked to prices, the guarantee will be linked to earnings. They will have achieved their goal in 2050 for one year but the year after retirement, those who have got into this wonderful new Government scheme will be back on means-tested benefits; back on the guarantee; back on the chain gang. That is not something to be proud of. It is crazy to get people just up to the poverty line for a year and then let them slip below it.

Mr. Duncan Smith: Does not moving to a means-tested system progressively trap people and bind those who would otherwise have been free of it to a process where they might as well not bother to save?

Mr. Webb: The hon. Gentleman is right in that, if the Government can say, after 50 years of their pensions policies, a quarter of pensioners will still be on means-tested benefits, as we are told by written answers, it is not something to be proud of. Even in 2050, the oldest pensioners will be the poorest, simply because they are women. Unless much changes, women will be likely to be poorer than men. The way to get people off means-tested benefits is to tier the basic pension and get the basic pension for older pensioners to subsistence level so that it is worth having in its own right.

Kali Mountford: Many women, especially carers, have no entitlement and are totally reliant on means-testing. Will not the new system take them off that and give them the opportunity of a pension in their own right?

Mr. Webb: The hon. Lady is right to say that, under the proposed scheme, people who, for example, care for a disabled person for a year will get 90p a week on the pension. They would get about 80p on the basic state pension through credits. By 2050, if they spend their whole lives caring for a disabled person, they will reach old age with a basic state pension based on credits and a state second pension that brings them just to the poverty line for one year only. In the second year, the basic pension will go with prices and we do not know what will happen to the second state pension but the guarantee will go up in line with earnings. They will be back to means-testing. They will not be on a bit of housing benefit but income support. Even if the whole scheme comes in and all the unfunded promises are honoured, such people will end up on income support for every year bar one of their retirement. That is not satisfactory. There may be 10 years to consider their position, but, by the time that they become older pensioners—most women will live to such an age—we want them to have a decent income that does not rely on the means test.

Mr. Viggers: I have attended pensions seminars with the hon. Gentleman and respect his view. Will he expand on his last point? Would not a carer who worked until 2050 and managed to save more than £8,000 be worse off?

Mr. Webb: The hon. Gentleman is right. The Government plan to review the capital limits, and I welcome that. I am sure that the review is in response to the question that I tabled long before the Green Paper. I asked what would be the cost of raising the upper threshold of £8,000 to, say, £20,000. It is negligible, about £20 million or £25 million. The Department of Social Security can spend that in the blinking of an eye. The Government should have done that for this April. At the very least, they should undertake it as part of the review. I welcome the noises from the Government on that front, but much more needs to be done.

Kali Mountford: The Liberal amendment talks of raising expectations, which is what the hon. Gentleman seems to be doing. Can he tell the House how he would fund them?

Mr. Webb: I would be delighted to. The £5 and £3 figures could be funded in a variety of ways. First, one could cap the overall amount of tax relief. The Secretary of State shied away when my hon. Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) asked about higher rate relief. We are not necessarily suggesting restricting it to the standard rate, but if one were to cap at a certain amount for the year in which one was putting in tax reliefs, it would greatly simplify the whole system and would not put a huge amount into the pensions of the highest earners. In other words, one could cap at a generous figure, but money would still be freed up for the oldest pensioners, who are also the poorest.

Secondly, we support price indexation of the basic pension for the under-75s. Every year, pensions increase in line with prices for a large number of pensioners, but the income—national insurance contributions—more or less increases in line with earnings, which creates extra revenue each year. That would be another way to fund the proposals. There are many ways to fund schemes on that scale. If older, poorer pensioners are a priority, those are the sorts of places that we need to look.

[Mr. Webb]

The Government have grotesquely overstated what they have done so far on pensions. There is more to come and we welcome extra help for the poorest pensioners, but the reliance on the means-tested approach is excessive. We hope that the Government will respond positively and will seriously consider our constructive proposals to tier the basic rate pension not merely for next year, but as a long-term strategy that would target the poorest without the indignity of means-testing and would provide security and dignity in old age.

5.2 pm

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): Perhaps I should begin with a confession, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because before I came to the Chamber I received a message that my bleeper was awaiting me in the Whips Office. I am a non-possessor of a bleeper, but am soon to be a possessor. This will be the last social security debate in which I participate without one.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will remember the rules when he has the bleeper and will not bring it into the Chamber.

Mr. Field: I was about to say, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that, if you heard a bleeper earlier, it was not mine. Should I become off message during this debate, it will be unintentional, but I will not be able to plead that in future.

Clearly, there are two parts to our debate today. The hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) made that distinction. The first is our concern about what is happening to existing pensioners and the major future reforms that the Government are attempting. My only difference with the motion and the Government amendment is that they have both been less than generous about what the Government have achieved and what the Secretary of State intends to achieve by the end of this Parliament. The changes that the hon. Gentleman so quickly dismissed, such as value added tax on fuel, the winter fuel payments and the reintroduction of free eye tests as well as the commitment—if not yet the reality—to concessionary travel for pensioners, are very welcome to pensioners I meet in Birkenhead. I confess that those pensioners differ greatly from the hon. Gentleman's description of pensioners in Northavon. Birkenhead pensioners are pretty tough and cynical about what politicians say. They study carefully the difference between rhetoric and reality. I do not know whether that means that they should spend their holidays in the west country and pick up the trait that he described, but I would not concern myself with the worries that he had on that score.

Labour Members can be proud of the Government's record so far. Clearly, it would not be a record on which we would want to go into an election—my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State clearly would not want to do so either. In trying to improve on that record, he will have the support of Labour Back Benchers and a considerable amount of support from other parts of the House.

I shall touch on the longer-term reforms, which naturally centre on the Government's proposals outlined in the Green Paper. I shall set out my worries about the reforms as they are beginning to take shape. The Government say, rightly, that the document is a Green Paper, which shows that they are listening and willing to learn. In addition, it gives hon. Members the chance publicly—there are, thank goodness, many chances privately—to influence the debate.

My first concern is my major one: having read the Green Paper and listened to Ministers, I do not yet believe that they understand the people to whom they—or, they hope, somebody—will try to sell pensions. We are talking about those who comprise the third poorest group in our society. Life has not given them the opportunities and chances that would have enabled them to have portfolios or financial advisers or to become accustomed to practices with which some, if not all, Members of Parliament are acquainted. They will be asking, what is the Green Paper all about? Given the difficulty that we have with saying in a couple of sentences what it is about, question marks must hang over whether we have got the reform right. If we cannot explain it in terms simple enough to grip those who fall outside current pensions provision and enable them to understand what we are trying to do, it may be that the key objective of simplicity is still beyond our grasp.

My first worry about the proposals arises from all the talk about different sorts of pensions provision, for I do not believe that that should be our first step on what we hope will be the great journey of pensions reform. Linked to that is the statement made today by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, that everyone has different requirements; and the statement he made on the radio this morning, that all of us needed financial advice. I dispute that. We do not need advice about sending children to school; we think that such things should just happen. If we had a simple single pension provision for the first tier, there would be no need for financial advice, for the requirement would be that everyone should be a member of that scheme. The costs would certainly be different, for there would be no costs relating to financial advice; and there would be no reason for people saying that they could not understand why they should be members, so it would be a much easier scheme to enforce.

Linked to that are the two hands of the Government—the left hand and the right. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is right to say that he is proud to be introducing a minimum pension guarantee to help existing pensioners, but I worry about how that minimum pension guarantee will operate in the long term. I lack my right hon. Friend's confidence that, somehow, people will box that guarantee off in their mind, decide that it does not relate to them, and resolve to go ahead with saving in response to the Government's call to save more. I do not believe that they will ignore the fact that, if they are among the poorest third of members of our society, they might be only slightly, and certainly not much, better off if they save than if they do not. If they listen to today's debate or a recording of it, especially the speech made by the hon. Member for Northavon, they will begin to doubt whether, by saving, they can make themselves much better off.

We are at a watershed. Increasing numbers of pensioners must be telling their grandchildren their deep regret that they are decent people: that they saved, that they did not fiddle and that they became and remained members of their occupational pension scheme even though it would not make them much better off, only to find that they are substantially worse off than other people who did not save, whether or not they could have done so.

Without extending compulsion in the way that hon. Members on both sides of the House have argued we should, defending the minimum pension guarantee will become more difficult as the years go by. We are sending a powerful message to people whom we shall not compel, but whom we hope to persuade, or merely entice, to make provision for their pensions—we used to call it bribery when we were in opposition and the House discussed national insurance rebates to encourage people to take out private or stakeholder provision—when we know perfectly well that any financial adviser currently advising a third of the electorate should tell them that the worst thing for their financial health that they could possibly do is save. There is a deep sickness in our society when such a statement is true.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): The right hon. Gentleman is talking a lot of sense, and many people outside the House will support what he says. Does he accept that people who have saved become increasingly resentful of those who get looked after, even though they have made no provision whatsoever? That resentment will cause some serious problems unless what the right hon. Gentleman says is taken on board.

Mr. Field: I have heard that the Government will look at the disregards, and we know how cheaply that may be done—the sum mentioned is regularly lost in the accounts. If the accounts were out by only £25 million, the Comptroller and Auditor General would throw his hat in the air for the first time and say that he could sign them without qualifying them.

Mr. Malcolm Wicks (Croydon, North): The other day, a constituent asked me two questions. Her first was, "How can anyone think that I can live on £80 a week?" Her second was, "Why did I bother to save for my pension, when all it has done is prevent me from getting income support?" I think that that is what my right hon. Friend is telling the House. Does he agree that no decent social policy has ever been built on the means test?

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): Hear, hear.

Mr. Field: Indeed, and my hon. Friend used to make the same point in opposition. I do not want to disturb or upset his constituent, but all hon. Members will know that people—good neighbours—come to our surgeries to make sure that the frailer and more elderly person who lives next door gets all the help available. However, those good people are not themselves eligible for income support and the passports and discover—they are good enough thank goodness for it—that their neighbour is on a higher income than they are. That is a problem that the Government inherited, and I am sure that no Labour Member would want to defend the situation for much longer.

The other matters about which I wish to speak stem from the Green Paper. As they stand, the proposals present a real danger to occupational pensions. I was pleased with one of the sentences in the Green Paper, which said that occupational pensions were one of the greatest social security successes this century, if not the greatest. However, the proposal is to encourage employers to set up stakeholder schemes. My worry is that employers will decide to do so and close entry into existing occupational schemes for new workers.

That is beginning to happen anyway. I hope that the Government, in their proper listening mode, will consider the proposals that have been made suggesting that the first tier of all pension provision, including occupational pensions, will be stakeholder provision. The effect would be that occupational schemes would continue to provide, not merely the minimum provision, but so much more as well.

My next worry about the proposals is that, having heard so much about stakeholder pensions and what they will achieve, we now find that there will be a considerable variety in such provision. I am not concerned that the next scandal will have to do with mis-selling, but that there will be a problem of churning. By that I mean that, once stakeholder pensions are introduced, people who have heard so many good things about what such pensions will achieve will believe that they should be in those schemes rather than in their current schemes. That may be true but, given the age of the people who might make that decision, the likelihood is that it will turn out not to be. Therefore, the problem facing us in the next Parliament will not be one of mis-selling but of churning.

Mr. Duncan Smith: I do not want to make a point that is parti pris, but does the right hon. Gentleman agree that part of the problem is that, in the Green Paper, the Government set out to introduce a stakeholder pension that is simple to administer and cheap and easy to understand? That is the basic element all the proposals must have if they are to succeed. Now, the Government have come up with the additional idea about paying for advice, and there may be other ideas to come. Does that not run counter to the initial premise, and will it not cause people to wonder whether they are doing the right thing? Is it not possible that, in years to come, people will say, "Why did I take out that investment?"

Mr. Field: The hon. Gentleman is being slightly unfair to the Government. The Secretary of State made it clear that today's proposals are aimed at people on middle and high incomes. However, there has never been any difficulty in getting such people to save. The real problem is to set up a redistributive scheme that the poor can join. The aim is to ensure that poor people will be free of means-tested assistance—not merely for a year, but for all their lives.

My final point has to do with annuities. Most hon. Members will understand that the European central bank is committed to a policy that will keep inflation below 2 per cent. That policy means that, for the indefinite future, annuity rates will continue to fall. It is hoped that they will hit bottom at some stage. The result will be that many people who have saved, in the belief that their savings would provide them with an adequate pension in retirement, will be deeply disappointed. I hope that the Government will devote some new thinking to the question of what sort of bond provision should be introduced to offer pensioners an alternative to buying annuities.

I do not accept that pensioners do not understand their finances. They seem to be a lot better at it than I am at understanding mine. The Secretary of State said that

[Mr. Field]

annuities are sometimes tax-free vehicles, but he went on to say that a pension probably will turn out to be a more important investment than a home. Yet a home is also bought with some tax-free concessions, and we do not get too exercised about what people should do with those. We do not decide that people must, at a certain date, trade in their homes because they may misbehave with those assets. It is time to make a big jump and to reconsider the way in which people are forced to trade their pension capital for annuities, something that substantially disfavours them for the rest of their lives.

In my speech, I wanted to make two points. First, I wanted to congratulate the Government on the moves that they have made for existing pensioners. The Government are backed by a huge majority of hon. Members wanting that record to be improved by the next election. My guess is that the Government are pushing at an open door to such an extent that, at the next election, Conservative Members—for opportune reasons if not for good ones—will support further reforms introduced by the Government to improve pensioners' living standards.

The second element of my contribution has to do with long-term reforms. I am very grateful that the Government have published the Green Paper, and that they want to listen and to learn.

5.18 pm

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): So far, no hon. Member has declared an interest. I am a member of the—rather bad—parliamentary pension scheme. I am fortunate to have some modest provision of my own, and am also the chairman of a pension fund.

The 1997 Labour election manifesto stated that a Labour Government would

"lay the foundations for a modern welfare state in pensions and community care."

That was clearly regarded as very important ground on which to fight the campaign, as the party chose to execute what I consider to be the dirtiest trick in recent electoral history. As *The Daily Telegraph* reported on 26 April 1997, the previous day, the present Chancellor of the Exchequer had said:

"it was a known and admitted fact that the Conservative plan is to abolish the state pension".

The same report stated:

"Although looking distinctly uncomfortable and visibly irritated, Mr. Blair, flanked by Gordon Brown, the shadow Chancellor, refused to condemn such tactics. Instead he defended the party's decision to attack the Government's plans."

That was a scurrilous and disgraceful incident in recent politics.

In fact, the Conservative plan was quite different. The scheme called basic pension plus proposed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley), who at that time represented St. Albans and was Secretary of State for Social Security, was a carefully considered framework for ensuring long-term pension efficiency. However, the Labour tactic certainly worked: canvassing revealed that many elderly pensioners were deeply worried that their pensions were to be scrapped. That was really awful.

Under current pension provision, those in private sector schemes are well funded and well cared for. UK pension funds contain £800 billion in pension assets, which is equivalent to 77 per cent. of gross domestic product, and is the same as the amount reserved in pension assets for the whole of the rest of Europe. It compares with 7 per cent. of GDP in France and 14 per cent. in Germany.

However, the benefits are thinly shared. According to a NatWest study, only one in five of the people currently working is heading for comfortable retirement. Half are heading for financial difficulties, and one in three will be essentially dependent on the state. That is based on the definition of an income of £180 a week as comfortable, rather than the £70-plus that is the current pension. The amounts required to fund that level of provision are considerable. If the normal pension multiplier of 16 is applied to the extra £100 a week, or £5,000 a year, some £80,000 is needed to provide £180 a week.

What principles should we use to approach the problem? I have quoted the noble and formidable Lady Castle before, and I find myself in strong agreement with her once again. In a booklet entitled "We can afford the Welfare State", co-written with Professor Peter Townsend, she set out three basic principles which I should like to endorse. Those principles should have underlined the Government's commitment to pensions. The booklet says:

"If we want to encourage people to move from welfare to work, we must reduce the area of means-testing, not increase it."

I agree with that. Secondly, the booklet says:

"We must resurrect the state basic pension as the foundation of security in old age for everyone."

There were sound reasons why the Conservatives broke the link between pensions and earnings, but the process has gone too far. We must resurrect the state pension.

The third principle is unattractive, but unavoidable. The booklet states:

"It should be compulsory for everyone to contribute to an adequate second pension."

Mr. Sutcliffe: I should not miss the opportunity to find out whether the policies that the hon. Gentleman is advancing are shared by his colleagues on the Conservative Front Bench. I think not.

Mr. Viggers: The hon. Gentleman will have to ask my hon. Friends. He might read last Thursday's speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies), who will wind up for the official Opposition. I heard that speech, and thought it so fine that I handwrote a note to my hon. Friend to congratulate him on it. I look forward very much to hearing him again if he happens to catch your eye tonight, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Compulsion is unavoidable, for reasons that have been discussed by several hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb). The anomaly is that people who save will be worse off. If there is no compulsion, people will not save. Compulsion is essential.

The Secretary of State said that he had been involved in pension planning both in his present post and in his previous one at the Treasury. However, many informed journalists believe that a turf war between the Treasury and the Department of Social Security lies at the heart

of the mess over pensions in which the Government find themselves. In the words of the Prime Minister, the DSS is tasked to

"deliver significant savings over the longer term"

from the social security budget. Clearly, the Department is not finding that possible.

Introducing a minimum pension guarantee—a rebranding of income support—which is indexed to wages will inevitably increase the gap between that guarantee and the state retirement pension. Means testing is being institutionalised. The single person's guarantee of £75 a week, and the couple's guarantee of £116.60, will be available only to those who have savings of less than £8,000. Anyone who has more will not be eligible for the minimum pension guarantee, or for housing benefit of £40 a week and council tax benefit of perhaps £10 a week.

The hon. Member for Northavon made the same calculation that I made on how much would be required to provide a pension of £50 a week, or £2,500 a year. Applying the pension fund multiplier of 16, some £40,000 would be required. Anyone who cannot save £40,000 need not bother; they would be wasting their time, and their money.

It is extraordinary that the present Chancellor of the Exchequer declared in 1993:

"I want the next Labour Government to achieve what in 50 years of the welfare state has never been achieved. The end of the means test for our elderly people."

What he has achieved is exactly the opposite, and there will be widespread resentment throughout the country as people who saved and provided for their futures realise that others who live in the same road and who made no provision are better off than they are.

The effect on the taxpayer is also significant. According to answers to my parliamentary questions, means-tested benefits cost an average of 7 per cent. to administer, while universal benefits cost 2.5 per cent. The basic state pension costs only 45p a week to administer, while income support costs £5.45. Means tests bring disadvantages of costs as well as of resentment.

The Government's other big pensions activity was their raid on pension funds when they abolished the advance corporation tax dividend tax credit. That amounted to £3.9 billion this year, and will amount to £5.4 billion in a full year. It will reduce future benefit by up to 10 per cent. It will also impose further costs—local authorities must fund the extra pension required by their employees, and that has been calculated to mean council tax rising by 12p in some areas.

Labour's 1997 manifesto pledge to

"support and strengthen the framework for occupational pensions"

is not being met. Instead, there is a substantial increase in means testing, and in envy and bitterness. There are greater costs to the taxpayer. The Labour party is failing to fulfil its promise.

5.27 pm

Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe (Bradford, South): We should start by remembering why we are here. This is an Opposition debate on pensions, so where are the massed ranks of Conservatives who want to tell us how badly they feel? It is good to see sinners repent, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) has reminded me. I am happy to follow the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) because I respect his concrete contribution to discussions on pensions.

Mr. Viggers: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene so early in his speech. I shall tell him why the Conservative Benches are rather depleted: a huge Conservative rally has, most unfortunately, happened to coincide with the debate.

Mr. Sutcliffe: The mind boggles. What passes for a huge Conservative rally these days? We shall wait with bated breath for that rally to tell us something about Conservative policy, particularly on pensions.

The debate is about the Opposition trying to embarrass the Government on pensions. However, the only people who should be embarrassed about their pensions policy are members of the Conservative party. It is as though, on 1 May 1997, they drew a line under what had happened before then. They take no responsibility for what the previous Government did.

I am happy to be able to speak today as I have been unable to do so recently because of the protocol surrounding Parliamentary Private Secretaries. Pensions are vital to the people of the United Kingdom. The debate's focus has been narrowed to the detail of pensions, rather than the big picture. The Secretary of State has rightly pointed out that that big picture is important to Labour.

As the hon. Member for Northavon reminded us, pensioners need not be patronised. They know what happened under the previous Government. They know who tried to introduce value added tax at 17 per cent. on energy—the Conservative party. They know who broke the link between earnings and pensions—the Conservative party. They know who deserted the health service and created health inequality among pensioners—the Conservative party. Therefore, we will take no lessons today from the Opposition about missed opportunities on pension policy.

Occupational pensions play an important part in the way forward. The Green Paper sets out opportunities; but the previous Government missed opportunities when the Labour party tabled amendments to the Pensions Act 1995 to improve protection for workers, for member trustees and for pensioner board members to enable them to join occupational pension schemes—all dismissed by the Conservative Government.

If the Opposition are to learn any lessons, they must tell us why they did not improve the situation for British pensioners, and why British pension provision fell to the lowest level in the EC.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): The Labour party is now in government. If the hon. Gentleman believes what he is saying so strongly, why do not the Labour Government restore the link with earnings for the basic pension? It is very simple.

Mr. Sutcliffe: We will cover such issues as we proceed with the debate.

Because of the nature of today's debate, it is important that we set the scene and judge the Government's pension record. We cannot do that without examining what went before. A group of pensioners visited the House yesterday

[Mr. Sutcliffe]

on a trip organised by Age Concern and they said to me, "You're not doing badly for 20 months, given that the other lot had 18 years." I accept that we must be modest and not raise expectations, as the Liberal Democrats say, but pensioners will not be patronised. They know what has happened to their incomes and to the society in which they live, and it is right that the Government should look to the big picture.

The Government inherited a complete mess on welfare reform and social security. The budget was running out of control and there was no direction. *[Interruption.]* If one studies social security matters in detail, one knows how the budget is divided up and that pensions account for a big part of that.

A measure of society is how it treats its older people, how they fit into society and how they feel about themselves. Therefore, all aspects of Government policy should relate to the pension framework. As well as pension provision, we need an improved health service. We have to create an economic environment where pension value remains constant. We must create a situation in which people who have worked hard all their lives have the opportunity for a decent retirement. The Opposition should learn to choose debates on subjects on which people outside share some of their concerns. They do not share their concerns when it comes to developing pension policy.

I was interested to hear my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead. He knows the work that went into the pension review and how the former Minister of State, Department of Social Security, our hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham), listened to people throughout the country on pensions. He listened to voluntary groups, pensioners, and people such as Jack Jones and Barbara Castle—people with a view on pensions—and we have set down a particular route. I know that there are concerns about the long term, but, in the short term, we have been successful in trying to alleviate some of the problems faced by pensioners.

I made available an extra £21 billion for the winter fuel payment. It is hard for Labour Members to listen to Opposition Members carping about such measures, because we know that they have a real effect on people's lives. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) may mock, but such measures are important to people out there. We must remember that we represent real people. The Chamber is not simply for political point-scoring; it is for governing the country and governing with consent. If we had a poll now to discover in whose hands pensions would be safest, I am sure that people would agree that they would be safest in the Labour party's hands, not the Opposition's.

Miss Kirkbride: Only because the Government have a built-in majority.

Mr. Sutcliffe: We have a majority because people trust us on pensions.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We cannot have exchanges from a sedentary position. The hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) knows that, if she wants to intervene, she must do so formally.

Mr. Sutcliffe: Yes, we accept that we are in government, and we fully accept that it is our responsibility now to develop policies on pension and welfare reform. To administer benefits, including pensions, we need an active modern service, and we certainly did not have that under the previous Government.

I can talk from first-hand experience of the demoralisation among staff in social security departments, many of whom were on temporary contracts and did not know their long-term future, and many of whom had to claim benefits themselves. When people went to social security offices to ask about benefits, including pensions, they were not given advice and support on the appropriate benefit. If they applied for the wrong benefit, the staff were not allowed to tell them what benefit they should go for, and they were asked to leave. That was the result of a straitjacket of Treasury-driven cuts under the Conservative Government. It had nothing to do with principle or developing pension policy. That was the support that the previous Government gave pensioners.

Pensions are complicated and we need to ensure that pensioners receive their proper entitlement. That is why I am proud that the Labour Government instituted a scheme to ensure that, in nine project areas, pensioners had the opportunity to know their entitlement. We tried to ensure that there was discussion between local authorities and the Government so that claim forms were easy to complete and individuals were advised on their benefit entitlements. That was a positive step to try to ensure that the millions of people who were not claiming the income support to which they were entitled did so.

The Government, through the minimum income guarantee, are trying to change our approach to pensions. It is right and proper, as has been pointed out, that we should change the culture of pension provision in Britain. Ours is an argument based on principle. Those who can work should have the opportunity to do so, and those who cannot should be looked after. We are telling those who can save and who can provide for the future that they must do so, but most ordinary people with such an opportunity will take it. They will be encouraged by the annual statement from their pension provider, no matter what sector is involved. That annual statement will tell them where they are in terms of their pension provision. That is a massive step towards people acknowledging what they have to do for the future.

We have heard no mention today from Opposition Members about the poorest pensioners. They never mentioned poverty or the position of carers and people with disability. They should apologise for their lack of compassion to such people, to many of whom society owes a great debt for the hours of support and care that they give.

We can have a reasoned debate on pensions, and it is right that we should, but that cannot take place in the atmosphere that we have this afternoon of an Opposition day debate. No Opposition Front-Bench spokesman is present, and not even a handful of Conservative Members—

Dr. George Turner: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. As a new Member, I am surprised that it is in order that those who have tabled an Opposition motion are not even present on the Front Bench. Is it in order for that to continue?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has been here long enough to realise in his heart of hearts that that

is not a point of order. It is entirely up to individual Members whether they present themselves in the Chamber or in any Committee of the House.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: It was not a point of order.

Mr. Sutcliffe: We do not want the debate to descend too low, but the Opposition's intention is clear.

It is important that pensioners in my constituency and across the country know where the pensions debate is going. The hon. Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) spoke about the need to restore the link between pensions and earnings and to re-examine pension provision, but we heard nothing from the other Conservatives Members whose party had 18 years in which to put right a problem that we tackled as soon as we came to power.

We could see the pensions disaster ahead, and we knew that we needed to be honest with people. That is our strength. The Government are committed to honest debate about pension provision and the difficult decisions that people have to face. We acknowledge that there are sections of society that need support and protection. I understand that pensioners just above the income support level are concerned that they have saved whereas others might not have, but I want us to create a society in which, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead says, the community is considered as a whole. The Government have polices to deal with people who might deliberately not save or who might avoid work, but I should prefer there to be a decent standard of living for all and a minimum income level below which people should not fall.

With the introduction of the national minimum wage, and of better employment conditions through the fairness-at-work proposals, we are creating a society that looks after the individual, a society in which people who can do well are enabled to do so but in which those who fall through the gap, through no fault of their own, are looked after.

The Green Paper and the speech of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State show the difference between the two main parties. We are committed to listening, seeing what can be done and being straight about what the long-term worries will be instead of just trying to score cheap political points in a half-day Opposition debate.

5.42 pm

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): I must first declare an interest as I am the chairman of a company that manages pension funds.

Getting pension policy right for everyone is crucial for an advanced society like ours. Getting it right means that people can have a decent standard of living in their latter years, but it is also of great economic importance. It is unfair not to recognise as a major achievement of the past 20 years the fact that we built up £800 billion of private sector funding and that some 85 per cent. of people who retired did so with an occupational or personal pension at the age of 65.

In most of continental Europe, the economies are out of balance because of a lack of private funding; and, because of high add-on employment taxes, 20 million people are priced out of work. At the other end of the scale, Japan has the problem of excessive personal saving because of inadequate pension provisioning, in both the private and state sector. That has resulted in individuals saving too much for fear of retiring in poverty. Economically speaking, getting the system and the balance right is extremely important.

It is rather glib for Labour Members to brush off the importance of the advance corporation tax attack on pension funds. In my personal election address in 1997, I warned my constituents, many of whom were approaching pension age, of the risk of that ACT recovery attack on pension funds, and I believe that it is no accident that my constituency produced one of the largest Conservative majorities in the country. To dress up the proposal to reduce pension fund accumulation by some £5 billion a year and to say that it is justified by tax reform is, frankly, to mislead people. The accumulation of reserves out of which to pay pensions in future is crucial.

The increased costs of funding have not yet worked their way through the system, but, in the company sector, they will lead to a substantial move away from defined benefit final salary schemes to defined contribution money purchase schemes. No new defined benefit schemes are coming through now, and, from within the industry, I see many companies looking to move to money purchase schemes in order to control their costs. At the end of the day, such schemes will provide smaller pensions for the great majority in the middle.

I suspect that it will not be popular among those on the Labour Benches if I say that the Government's handling of pension mis-selling has been unwise. I do not deny that there was a huge difficulty, but, as others have said, the main problem has been the success in bringing down inflation over recent years, the fall in gilt yields and the resulting virtual doubling of the cost of annuities. It is fine to say that the annuity one buys will hold its value better, but when one retires at 65, much of the money purchase provisioning ends up buying a great deal less than people reasonably expected 15 years ago, whereas company occupational schemes have improved and their members have benefited at the expense of members of money purchase schemes.

There has been a major improvement in the standards of financial advice in the United Kingdom in this decade, largely as a result of the Financial Services Act 1986. In a sense, that improvement is being undone and negated by the message being sent by the Government.

There has historically been pension mis-selling in the state sector. I have had substantial correspondence with women who worked for the state in the 1960s, 1970s and even the 1980s who feel that they were talked into cashing in their pension rights for a capital sum and that the Government's response was simply that advice in a magazine at that time was sufficient. However, that was 20 years ago and standards were different.

More recently, two or three constituents have written to me about Department of Social Security projected pension arrangements which omitted to include the fact that the state earnings-related pension for widows is to halved with effect from April 2000. They complained that even the DSS did not advise them of the correct situation and they had not made adequate provision.

Ten years ago, people running occupational pensions schemes frequently behaved badly. They did not give fair transfer values or advise those leaving a company of the

[Mr. Howard Flight]

potential value of their deferred pension, and the transfer payments made were often ludicrously low. I well remember that, particularly people under 30, could not wait to get out of their occupational scheme. They wanted their own portable pension scheme and, even though circumstances and the lack of sound advice at the time have caused problems for many, the personal pension movement of the past 15 years has been a major benefit for many. Hundreds of thousands of people have pensions beyond the state provisioning, which they would have otherwise not have had.

It might be utopian, but I believe that it would be wonderful if there were cross-party agreement on this subject. It does not help if the system keeps changing all the time. People need a straightforward framework that they know and can trust. Although the Government say that they took many soundings before publishing the Green Paper, I, and most of the people whom I know in the industry, believe that there is a certain quick-fix approach to it. It focuses on a particular aspect that I admit needed focusing on, but the Government have not thought about the knock-on effects or other relevant aspects.

I do not know whether LISA was dreamed up by the Treasury with the knowledge of the Department of Social Security. However, it appears that it is not in tandem with the main thrust of the proposals contained in the Green Paper.

It has correctly been made clear that the Government have focused on the major issue of what should be the decent minimum income in old age, and on the fact that, over the next 50 years, much more than at present, people are heading to be dependent upon income support. If anything, the number of people earning less than £20,000 a year without funded pensions is growing, not reducing.

My criticism of the Government's proposals is that the thinking behind them amounts substantially to determining the cheapest and slightly quick-fix way of addressing the problem. As has been said, there is the major problem of disincentive to work and save. In particular, it is felt by some that they will do better by not participating in the scheme.

The second big issue involves the self-employed, who represent a huge area of lack of personal provisioning. Indeed, there is no incentive for the self-employed. They cannot become members of the revised scheme and they have little incentive to participate in a LISA.

The final objection, which has not yet been brought out, is that there are major threats to the bottom half of the middle of society. There is a great risk that many companies will embrace the new stakeholder schemes and that collective personal pension schemes will have to be given up. For many who belong to occupational schemes where the company contributes, there is a dangerous incentive to use a stakeholder scheme and not to contribute to other than top-hat schemes.

Given that everything is moving towards more and more money purchase, we must address the issue of whether to buy annuities, and the requirement to buy them at 75. There are many schemes for the self-employed which involve buying an annuity upon retirement. As we have heard, many people are now being forced to buy an annuity at potentially the wrong time. We need to have new rules and a reconsideration of the draw-down arrangements. As others have argued, we need more imaginative ways to deploy pension assets once the pension is to be drawn.

In short, I suggest that the Green Paper has not addressed the large and important territory of related issues. Instead, it has focused on the narrow issue of how to deal with the employed part of lower-income earners. LISA is not really an answer to the self-employed pension problem, which is lack of provision. I fear that the Government have presented rather drawing-room-like proposals that will not be understood by the man in the street. They are too complicated and there is urgent need for major simplification of the pension world which, as a result of the Revenue's obsession with avoidance, has become a labyrinth and triffid of complicated tax rules that no one understands.

There is a need for much greater reform and a much closer look at pensions. It would be wonderful if there could be cross-party agreement. Many good things have come up, but I trust that the Government will note that there have been quite a few criticisms from the pension fund industry. I hope that the Government mean what they say in terms of the document being a Green Paper and that they will take account of the many comments that are being made and have regard to the areas that will need to be addressed.

5.54 pm

Miss Geraldine Smith (Morecambe and Lunesdale): My constituency has a higher-than-average proportion of pensioners included in the population. This is so because many retired people, having lived and worked all their lives in industrial towns and cities, like the prospect of living out their retirement in a seaside location that is in close proximity to the lake district.

The available of all types of housing at relatively low prices provides them with an incentive to take the plunge and move into the area. The net result is, as I have previously stated, that the area has a disproportionate number of elderly people. That being the case, I am sure that the debate will be followed with a great deal of interest by many of my constituents.

As the large concentration of pensioners within my constituency contains sizeable elements of all social groups, it has provided me with the opportunity to see at first hand over many years the stark contrast between the quality of life enjoyed by those pensioners who have retired with a decent occupational or personal pension, and the misery and despair suffered by those condemned to exist on the basic state pension. While many of the better-off have rightly been able to enjoy the freedom that retirement has given them, for the poorest pensioners the golden years of retirement have turned into an eternal nightmare.

There is little doubt that the previous Tory Government's decision to break the link between earnings and pensions considerably swelled the ranks of pensioners living in poverty. The progressive devaluation of the basic state pension has dragged many hard-up pensioners into the welfare benefit system. That progressive slide into poverty, which has afflicted so many elderly people, has completely devastated their lives.

Many pensioners are confused about, or entirely unaware of, the benefits to which they are entitled. That is in no small way thanks to the insidious suggestions

constantly propagated by Opposition Members that anyone who receives a state benefit is a scrounger. Many impoverished pensioners who are aware of their entitlement to income support are too proud to apply for it. I therefore welcome the Government's decision to introduce guaranteed minimum levels for pensioners. I welcome also the Government's long-term commitment to increase guaranteed minimum levels in line with earnings, thereby ensuring that even the poorest pensioners share in the growing prosperity of our nation.

Clearly defined minimum income levels will provide a focal point for many pensioners who are unsure of their entitlements and will prove to be of great assistance to the Government in their efforts to ensure that all pensioners receive the income to which they are entitled. I welcome also other measures that the Government have taken, such as assistance with fuel bills, concessionary travel and free eye tests. Above all, I believe that the extra £21 billion investment in the national health service and the improvement in service standards that it will bring will be welcomed by people throughout the country, with the exception, perhaps, of some of those who sit on the Opposition Benches.

Radical proposals for the future of pensions are contained within the Green Paper. The first question that we must ask ourselves is whether the system really needs such reforms or whether we can tweak it to make it more responsive to the needs of our people. Within the current system, we have the basic state pension, which covers nearly all employees and the self-employed. We also have secondary pensions in the form of state earnings-related pension schemes, occupational schemes and personal schemes, which are compulsory for most employees. However, only the personal pension option is open to the self-employed, albeit on a voluntary basis. There are also numerous private schemes available to those who wish, or are able, to make additional pension provision above and beyond the compulsory pension level.

The system as it stands fails to provide adequate security in old age for many. It fails entirely those who earn less than the lower earnings limit of £3,300 a year. They are not even entitled to the basic state pension, let alone any form of secondary pension. They are therefore totally dependent on welfare benefits in old age. Other low earners who earn between £3,300 and £9,000 are also poorly served by the current system. The high administration costs and charges of private funded schemes make them an unattractive proposition for such people. Unless they are fortunate enough to belong to an occupational pension scheme, they will have to rely on state provision and will be left behind as the nation grows richer.

Even those in the middle income bracket are not adequately catered for by the current system. The ever-increasing flexibility required by the modern labour market and the growth of small and medium companies is leading to a downturn in occupational pension provision, and many people are left only with the options of SERPS, which is declining in value, or high-cost private schemes. The self-employed are probably worst served. A large proportion of them are on low to middle incomes. Their only option is a high-cost personal scheme to top up their basic state pension.

All in all, it is apparent that the current system is failing a huge number of people for a variety of reasons. It is equally apparent that radical reform is essential. The Government's plans for a low-cost, high-return stakeholder pension will provide a bridge between the state and private provision.

The granting of pension credits to carers, something that has already been mentioned, is an imaginative idea that at long last gives recognition and comfort to that often-forgotten legion who play such an important role. The assistance provided for low and middle earners to attain a decent second pension will also be welcomed by millions.

I am not at all surprised that the Conservative motion totally opposes the measures that the Government have already introduced and those proposed in the Green Paper. The concept of the fairer, socially just and inclusive society that the Government are determined to build, and of which these measures are an integral part, is just as abhorrent to Tory Members as was the concept of a welfare state to their predecessors before its introduction just after the war.

6.2 pm

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Miss Smith), who made a somewhat emotional appeal on behalf of pensioners and their incomes. I am sure that her pensioner constituents will take great interest in what representations she makes to her Government to restore the link between the basic state pension and earnings, because she clearly implied they should do so. I look forward to her doing that.

The hon. Member for Bradford, South (Mr. Sutcliffe) made a similarly emotional appeal on behalf of pensioners and sought completely to rewrite history by suggesting that the previous Conservative Government did nothing about pensions. Labour Members often like to rewrite what happened under the previous Government, so I take this opportunity to remind the hon. Gentleman of that Government's enormous success. Some £800 billion is now invested in the private pensions industry and occupational pensions. Many of our citizens can look forward to their pension and their retirement with a great sense of certainty and security.

I remind Labour Members that that is a massive achievement because, when we introduced proposals for more private pension provision, they ran scare stories similar to the one that they ran about our reform of the basic state pension just before the last election. They said that we were trying to privatise pensions and abolish state pensions and that that was a terrible idea. Yet that was one of the greatest success stories of the previous Conservative Government.

Let us look to the future. In the United Kingdom, we can look forward to the national economy's balance sheet being such to enable us to afford pension provision. I readily agree that we might need to do more for poorer pensioners, but that balance sheet has been greatly helped by what happened during 18 years of Conservative Government. When we compare ourselves with our European Union counterparts, we realise that they will have great difficulty in being able to afford to meet the

[Miss Julie Kirkbride]

demands of their growing aging population and the many people who will look to the state to pay their earnings-related pension contributions.

Mr. Field: The hon. Lady is telling us about the achievements of the previous Conservative Government, which clearly do not relate to occupational pensions, which have been developing for the whole of the century. The previous Government's initiative was personal pensions. Will she tell the House how many people are drawing personal pensions and by what amount?

Miss Kirkbride: I do not have that information to hand. I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman, having been a Minister, knows the figures much better than I do. I am trying to draw attention to the fact—with which I am sure he will agree—that the great impetus given to providing for oneself, whether by occupational or personal pension, has been an enormous success from which we shall all benefit, because it will be possible to afford the pensions of the growing elderly population of which we shall be a part in future. It is important that Labour Members recognise how important that impetus has been—they would clearly like to forget about it.

We take exception to what happened when Labour got into power. The Chancellor introduced changes to advance corporation tax which have greatly diminished the value of pensions not only for future but existing pensioners, who will find that their pensions will increase at a lower rate because their pension funds will not be as valuable as they would otherwise have been. Labour Members say that they made those changes because they enabled them to reduce the level of corporation tax. We welcome that reduction, but its success in affecting the amount that industry invests has yet to be shown, and there has been a massive reduction in the amount of corporate investment. That change has yet to bear any fruit. We still insist that it was an unwise move that will affect us all.

The changes to ACT have a bearing on the problem of poorer pensioners. They, by definition, do not pay income tax, and they are now placed in the wicked position of being unable to reclaim the tax on their dividend contributions. It is an absolute disgrace that a party whose Members have, in their most recent speeches, made an emotional appeal on behalf of pensioners does not to allow the poorest pensioners to claim back their tax, while others, including myself and, perhaps, my colleagues, are able to do so.

Dr. George Turner: Will the hon. Lady advise the House which tax people are or are not getting back and when it was paid?

Miss Kirkbride: I refer to the tax that has already been paid by a company through corporation tax, which is a tax on profits, and is then returned to the individual. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman is so ignorant that he does not understand that, but I am happy to explain exactly to what poorer pensioners are entitled.

As the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) pointed out in what was an excellent contribution, as always, 300,000 pensioners are in that position and 250,000 of them will not be eligible for the minimum pension guarantee because they have too many savings. The minimum pension guarantee, which is typical of the Government's hype about their policies, affects very few people because the vast majority of those to whom it will apply already receive that money in one form or another, such as through income support. They are not that bothered whether the money is called a minimum pension guarantee or income support, but they need to know that it is on its way. The Government create policies and pretend that they have a huge impact when they clearly do not.

I reaffirm the points that have been made by several hon. Members about the difficulties of the Government's proposals to create an incentive to save. The operation of the state second pension alongside the basic state pension will mean that very poor people will be eligible for the minimum pension guarantee. As I understand it—the proposals are complicated—those who are earning between £3,000 and £9,000 a year will be eligible for the state second pension and will end up receiving pretty much the same amount as the minimum pension guarantee, which the Government propose will be 20 per cent. of real earnings. All those people will get the same, irrespective of their contribution.

Due to the Government's commitments, what will happen to those who will be earning £10,000 a year—just above the point at which they would be eligible for a state second pension? They will be encouraged to take out a stakeholder pension, yet they will be earning very little—less than £200 a week. They are very poorly paid once tax is deducted, yet they will have to save through a stakeholder pension—or any other vehicle that the Government suggest in their various weird and wonderful schemes, which we do not particularly understand.

Such people would have to earn, say, £41,000 a year to make up for state benefits. Indeed, they would need extra income because, if they are not eligible for income support, they are not eligible for passported benefits either. Therefore, such people will have to save a great deal of money if they are to be comfortable in their retirement. It is difficult to see how people on an income of about £10,000 can do what the Government, and we all, hope that they will do. The major and fundamental problem with the Government's proposal is that they are turning their face away from compulsion.

My hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) knows much more about occupational pensions than I do, but I know that there are great fears that the system that the Government are introducing will undermine the occupational pension sector. That trend has already started, and it will get worse. There is a massive incentive for employers to introduce stakeholder pensions, to which the Government have not said that companies should contribute.

Mr. Leigh: My hon. Friend is making a good point about employers. A point has occurred to me about employees, which I am not sure that the Government have answered. There will be a rebate of national insurance contributions for those entering a stakeholder pension of 9.2 per cent., starting at £9,000 a year, falling to 4.6 per cent. Surely that will be a further incentive to take

out a stakeholder pension rather than stay in an occupational pension scheme. Perhaps my hon. Friend has the answer.

Miss Kirkbride: I would not be so bold as to offer an answer on the Government's proposals. I am sure that the Minister will be happy to answer my hon. Friend's relevant point.

The stakeholder pension will affect the very people whom the Government want to help. When looking at their balance sheets and considering how expensive it would be to maintain occupational pensions, employers will be encouraged to offer stakeholder pensions because there is no requirement on them to contribute to those pensions. As a result, very many people will find themselves in a worse position.

Due to the discrepancy in earnings power in a company, there might be another effect, which would be worse for Labour Members to contemplate. Lower-paid employees, including part-time employees, will be offered stakeholder pensions, but the cream at the top of the company will have pensions to which the company will contribute. Many high earners will expect a significant pensions contribution from their employer as part of their benefits package. Labour Members ought to consider whether they are setting up an apartheid regime in the pension system. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members scoff, but I am afraid that they are doing their constituents no service by not recognising the difficulties that could occur as a result of the Government's proposal. As time is a little short, I shall conclude on that point.

6.14 pm

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): I had been in the House for a mere few weeks when we had a pensions debate, in which many Opposition Members concentrated on pension funds. Since many of them are pension fund managers, that was not surprising. I am, however, a little surprised that they have continued to confine the debate so narrowly and have not moved on in their thinking. I am also surprised to find that their attachment to private pension schemes has not altered, in spite of our experience of them. Someone asked earlier who is benefiting from private pension schemes. That is a conundrum; none of us knows. Nobody is yet receiving a pension or benefiting from such schemes, which have been operating for only 10 years, although a number of my constituents are having a great many problems as a result of mis-selling.

A very large company of financial advisers in my constituency told me of its problems due to pension mis-selling: it has to put the matter right—and quite right too. Why should pensioners bear the brunt of the problem? I admire the way in which the company is going about that task in training financial advisers. That should have happened in the first place. Conservative Members can offer no lessons in that regard.

The other thing that really upsets me about these debates is the concentration on a group of people who at least have the capacity to contribute to pension schemes—whether occupational, private or otherwise. The genuinely poorest people are those who are entitled to income support but do not claim it. I have made that point before, and make no apology for repeating it. The hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) thinks that we become emotional about those matters, but that is not surprising. She may argue that pensioners are made poor when, in receipt of private pensions. they encounter problems with anomalies in the system, but they are not the genuinely poorest people.

The Government have rightly introduced the minimum pension guarantee because we need to find a way in which to address the problem of the poorest pensioners. The genuinely poorest pensioners cannot wait until tomorrow for a new scheme. They have no opportunity to make any new contributions to a scheme. It is therefore right that we find a way in which to address that poverty. Connected to that task—I have said this to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and make no apology for repeating it—is the conundrum of the poverty trap. Being a listening Government, I think that they would want to avoid that. I will not accept from Conservative Members that the poverty trap became apparent just today. We inherited that problem, and must find a solution to it.

The problem of passported benefits, which is not confined to pensions, affects people who live just above the poverty line. It is right that the Government should consider the disregard. The Conservative party took away the benefit tapering system, so it is a little absurd for Opposition Members to tell us that they are concerned about the poverty trap. They did little about it in government. Indeed, they took away at least one of the supports that dealt with the problem.

Of course some pensioners who have saved for their old age feel resentful when they find that their neighbours, who through no fault of their own were unable to save, receive income support and the benefits that accrue from it. But, that is no reason not to introduce a minimum pension guarantee. Let us remind ourselves what that means. It means an increase three times higher than could have been expected and a guaranteed income.

Mr. Rendel: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kali Mountford: I am sorry, but time is preciously short. I am upset that I am having to speak so fast in the first place.

We must listen to people if we are to improve benefit take-up. Let us take cognizance of the fact that 28 pilot schemes are finding out what older people themselves think should be the answer. Why do people not rush to fill in their benefit claim forms? What are the possible solutions? How can a community pull together to support older people?

In this debate, we have heard details of the other measures in the support package, such as those relating to eye tests and health care. They are worth mentioning. However, we need to find a way to ensure that pensioners access the whole range of benefits and services available to them, and we must do something about the stigma attached to benefits such as income support, so that pensioners are willing to accept those benefits. Members of the Opposition are trying to denigrate the Government for having made a vital move in that direction; but the Government should be congratulated.

The second state pension is a masterstroke. I cannot understand why Opposition Members object to it. As those Members seem to have difficulty understanding the concept, I commend to them page 41 of the Green Paper, "Partnership in Pensions", which contains a graph which specifically shows how much easier it will be for

[Kali Mountford]

pensioners in future to have their guaranteed pension as of right. That takes away all the stigma and the problem of take-up that we have had for many years. When, at Prime Minister's Question Time this afternoon, I heard the word "redistribution", I thought about that graph, because it specifically shows how money will be redistributed to the poorest pensioners, who need it most.

The hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) made much of what he believes will be the problem of the future. We have a listening Government, and the hon. Gentleman has made his point well. I am sure that the Government do not want the poverty trap to continue. I believe that there are solutions to that problem, and I am sure that the Government will study them, but that is no reason not to have the second state pension. That option would open up a range of pensions to people who have previously been completely excluded—such people are so rarely mentioned by some hon. Members. They include women who are divorced, carers and people who are on low pay—perhaps in part-time jobs—or who have been in and out of work over a period.

The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) mentioned self-employed people, as though those people's needs were not addressed in the Green Paper. That simply is not true. Their needs are addressed by the second state pension or by the stakeholder pension. It is not true that a self-employed person cannot get a stakeholder pension. I refer hon. Members to page 50 of the Green Paper, where an example of such a pension is given. It seems to me that Conservative Members have come to the House, rather belatedly, to rally around pensions instead of rallying around their hon. Friends at their Tory rally. They have not even read the document, such is their commitment to pensions.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): Hon. Members are probably having more fun at the rally.

Kali Mountford: It seems that the hon. Member for Grundy wants to make an intervention from a sedentary position, but I shall resist comment, as time is short.

On pensioners, the Government inherited a downward spiral, and that spiral had to be arrested. The way to do that was by considering today's poorest pensioners. It is right to remove taxation anomalies from the system. It is right to provide a wide range of services for pensioners today. It is right to study the changes in demography and accept that, in future, there will be fewer people in employment as a proportion of the population, and that we must find a way to fund pensions for tomorrow.

When they were in government, Conservative Members accepted that we would run into that problem. It surprises me that, when an ideal solution is presented to them, they cannot see what is under their nose.

6.24 pm

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Despite the Government's good intentions, we now have a very confusing mixture of public and private provision in pensions—a mixture of personal pensions, occupational pensions, the basic state pension, the second pension and the stakeholder pension. I believe that there will be real confusion among people about how best to plan for retirement.

We should continue, on a cross-party basis, to seek solutions that have been tried abroad—although not necessarily by South American economies, which might be less developed than our own, or by city-state economies such as Singapore, which may have altogether fewer problems of an aging population.

In the five minutes that I am allowed, I shall cite the example of Australia. Australia is a highly developed economy, very similar to ours. Interestingly, it went through much the same stages as did our economy between 1900 and 1983. In 1900, it had the highest per capita gross domestic product in the world. By 1980, it had fallen to 14th place, and it had adopted many of the Keynesian solutions of nationalisation and of subsidies to manufacturers that our Governments had adopted.

Such was the state of the Australian economy, especially regarding pensions, that the then Treasurer, Paul Keating, announced that something had to be done radically to reform pensions. He said:

"We must let Australians know, truthfully, honestly, earnestly, just what sort of international hole Australia is in. If this Government cannot get a sensible economic policy, then Australia is basically done for. We will end up just being a third-rate economy. Then you are gone; you are a banana republic."

The left-of-centre Labour Government of Australia—I am making this speech because I hope that the Government are considering what is happening in Australia—decided something very radical indeed, far more radical than the measures that the Government are introducing. They went down the route that was suggested to them by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), but they went further. In 1986, under Mr. Paul Keating, they devised an innovative retirement system, based primarily on mandatory private savings in plans called superannuation funds.

All workers in Australia—this was done in consultation with trade unions—were required to put 3 per cent. of their earnings into those mandatory private funds. That figure will increase to 9 per cent. by 2002, when the system will be fully implemented. In 2002, all workers in Australia will be required to set aside 9 per cent. of their income in a superannuation fund of their choice; that is the underlying principle. A series of options will be open to them. The market will be highly regulated, to ensure that there is no mis-selling, but the worker is required to put the money into a fund of his choice.

I believe that compulsion is essential. I do not believe that one can have a voluntary system at the same time as a high safety net. We all want a high safety net; that is the reason for the minimum income guarantee. We do not want to allow pensioners to fall into poverty. It may not be their fault that they have not built up an adequate pension—take the example of a woman who has been divorced, who has worked hard all her life bringing up her family.

We want a high safety net, but if one has a high safety net—I know that that is why the Government are taking this route—and a voluntary system of contributions, inevitably, as my hon. Friend said, one ends up with a tremendous disincentive to save. Therefore, one must have a compulsory scheme, such as the one that the Australians have developed.

Mr. Field: Will the hon. Gentleman cast his mind back to the day, a couple of months ago, when I introduced a Bill to require compulsory stakeholder savings? The one hon. Member who stood up to oppose it was himself.

Mr. Leigh: The right hon. Gentleman knows full well why I did that. I was trying to tease out his hon. Friends to support his Bill, and hardly anyone came along. He well knows that. The right hon. Gentleman was going around—he had a complete headache—saying, "Please do not force a Division, because no one in the Government will support me." So let us not have any of that. The right hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well what we were doing then. However, I salute him. He was right to try to remind the Government of what they should try to achieve.

The Australian system has achieved more income for retirees. In future, average-waged workers should be able to retire with two or three times the income that they would have had under the original Government-run scheme. The new system has also resulted in increased national savings. The overall savings rate could climb by more than 3 per cent. of gross domestic product.

If that scheme in Australia is so good, and if it was introduced by a left-of-centre Government, why have not we heard more from our Government as to why they are not introducing it here? Why have they rejected the plans suggested by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead?

There is one difficulty with such a scheme—the Australian Government are moving down the road of means-testing to pay for it. Is it possible to introduce such a radical reform without an element of means-testing? The Government must think seriously about that.

I ask both sides of the House to co-operate in radical reform to try to prise our nation out of a culture of dependency and to increase responsibility, and to do so by means of a compulsory savings system, gradually brought in with a measure of bipartisan support. That is increasingly being tried around the world. It works, it is successful and it is the road that we should go down.

6.30 pm

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): I must deal with one important matter before I say anything else. The Government's proposals involve doubling the rate of accrual for entitlement to state second pension over the rate of accrual that applies under the SERPS system, from 20 to 40 per cent. of eligible earnings. In response to an intervention from me this afternoon, the Secretary of State denied that, on the subsequent band of earnings, from £9,000 to £18,500, the rate of accrual would be halved.

I refer the House to page 45 of the Green Paper, which I have read several times. Paragraph 3 states:

"The rate on the band of earnings £9,000 to £18,500 a year would be 10 per cent."—

as opposed to 20 per cent. at the present time, so that has been halved.

As I said earlier, I am sure that the Secretary of State did not intend wilfully to deceive the House, but he was close to doing so, if I may say so.

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman is one of the most good-natured Members of the House. It would be unfortunate if he suggested that I did anything other than answer what I understood him to say, which was that people earning between £9,000 and £18,500 would have half the rate of accruals. The point that I was making, which is common ground between us, is that, on the portion of those people's income before £9,000, they, too, get the double rate. Of course it is tapered out to £18,500. It would be nonsense to have a double accrual rate all the way up the scale. The table on page 41 of the Green Paper makes that clear.

I want to make it clear that I responded to what I understood the hon. Gentleman to say, both today and in the article in the recent pensions magazine. There is common ground between us. There is double the rate of accrual up to £9,000, then it is tapered out to £18,500 in an entirely sensible way.

Mr. Davies: Of course I accept the good faith of the right hon. Gentleman in his last remarks. *Hansard* will bear out the point that I made in the intervention, that, when the Government make announcements to the House, it is right that they should present both sides of any equation—they should give the good news but not conceal the bad news. I said that it was not enough to say that the rate of accrual below £9,000 would be doubled, and to leave out the material fact that the rate of accrual from £9,000 to £18,500 would be halved.

Dr. George Turner *rose—*

Mr. Davies: No, I cannot give way, as our time is limited. I apologise to the hon. Gentleman. As the House knows, I rather like giving way in such debates, and I wish that there were more time. Last Thursday, we were not running up against a time limit, but we are today.

I want to say something about some of the contributions to this interesting debate. I apologise in advance for the fact that I do not have time to deal with all of them—interesting contributions were made by members of all three parties. I single out my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) and thank her for a spirited and effective defence of the previous Government, which has the advantage that I do not have to say anything on that subject myself, as she said it so well for me.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers), who knows a great deal about the subject, as does my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight), presented a calculation that should make us all think carefully. If somebody saves £40,000 for a pension, he loses the whole amount. He does nothing other than generate a level of income equivalent to the means-tested benefits that he would have received if he had had no money or pension over and above the basic state pension. That is the dead-weight cost of saving.

Unfortunately, I think that my hon. Friend miscalculated that—he was too generous to the Government. It is important to realise that the means-tested benefits are indexed to the index of prices, and prospectively the minimum income guarantee even indexed to earnings. If one takes an annuity rate that is indexed to prices, one comes up at present with an annuity rate of just over 5 per cent., or under 5 per cent. if widows' benefits are offered.

On that basis, to generate an income of £4,000 in retirement, the sum of £80,000 would be required. It would be pathetic to imagine someone on a modest income setting aside £1,000 a year for 40 years, after expenses. With a total reasonable investment gain of about 3 per cent. compound, he might end up with £80,000, and it would all be a waste of effort—he would be cheated by the new Labour Government.

[Mr. Davies]

My hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs pointed out a crucial aspect of the present scene—the decline of the traditional salary-related, defined benefits scheme. My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) spoke tellingly of the Australian experience.

The right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) spoke extremely well, as he always does in these debates. He, too, expressed his fears about the future of occupational pensions in the light of the Government's proposals, and made some telling points on means-testing.

The hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) effectively devastated the Government's propaganda about the £140 a year additional earnings to pensioners as a result of their measures. He brought it down to a few pence a week. The House should be grateful to him for that cogent analysis.

It was obvious from the beginning of the debate that the Secretary of State was embarrassed about the subject. He did not come to the House full of pride, trying to sell the Government's proposals. He began with a complete red herring—the basic pension plus. He tried to put the argument back historically to the position several years ago. If he had any pride in the Government's own record or proposals, he presumably would have found an opportunity over the past six weeks to debate those proposals, but we had to wait for the Conservative Opposition to table the motion in order to get a debate on the Government's record.

That record is disgraceful. There is no other word for it. The Government were elected on a manifesto that contained three pension pledges—first, to preserve SERPS; secondly, to set up a citizenship pension for carers and the disabled; and thirdly, to set up a stakeholder pension.

The first promise has been explicitly broken in the Green Paper. SERPS is to go. The second promise has been covertly buried. We have heard no more about citizenship pensions. Nothing in the document offers carers or the disabled anything better than the means-tested—*[Interruption.]* Oh yes, I have read it. If the Minister of State wishes, we can have a debate on that, and I will demonstrate that those people are no better off under the Government's proposals than they would have been under the current means-tested arrangements.

As to stakeholder pensions, what a monumental shambles. For 15 months, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead and the right hon. Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) worked away on some scheme that was then rejected, and they were both sacked for their pains. So we did not get the original Green Paper when we were promised it last summer. Then, for six months, the Secretary of State and his team worked away on something else. We had the usual press spin and press leaks. We were told that they were working on compulsion and on something for the self-employed. Nothing emerged for the self-employed, and nothing emerged on compulsion.

It is clear that the Government had been vacillating and dithering about compulsion right up to the 11th hour, 59th minute and 59th second. Page 105 of the document—this will show that I have read it, although of course the Government will wish that I had not—refers to

"compulsory funded pensions for those earning over £9,000 a year".

They changed the policy even after the document had been sent to the printers. It does not get much more shambolic than that—especially in view of the fact that the Government had 18 months to think about it.

The fact is that the Government's proposals are a complete and utter mess. What is more, the Treasury believes that they are a mess because it produced its own document this afternoon. Is the timing significant? I think it is, because the Opposition's debate was scheduled for this afternoon. The Treasury document is another shambles. In 11 years in the House of Commons, I have never seen a Government produce a document like this. They did not even send it to the printer—I suppose because they were afraid that they might have to change it at the last minute. This piece of rubbish was produced on a do-it-yourself brochure-making machine in some office somewhere. The document falls apart in your hands if you read it two or three times—which is more times than anyone would want to read this particular rubbish.

The document is rubbish because it does absolutely nothing to increase the total pension provision in this country. In fact, it has the potential to damage profoundly some very good pension schemes. Employers will have to wind up their group personal pension schemes and replace them with stakeholder schemes because the document says that the group pension will not qualify as a stakeholder pension. The vast majority of group personal pensions involve employer contributions, but there is no obligation for employers to contribute to stakeholder pensions. Therefore, employers may wind up schemes involving employer contributions and replace them with Government stakeholder pensions, which require no contributions on their part. People will be much worse off.

The Government have not considered the administrative burden for employers. How are those who employ one, two or three people supposed to cope with the administrative burden associated with establishing the schemes? The Government have not dealt with the issue of people who move jobs. Who will look after their interests? Who will send the annual report to those who have moved? Perhaps that will be done by the employer several times removed from the current one. None of those things has been thought through.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) said this afternoon, we now have a plethora of proposals, including not only stakeholder pensions, group personal pensions and existing personal pensions but the Treasury's LISA proposals. It is obvious that everyone will have to seek advice about whether and at what point they should opt out of the new state second pension and what to opt into or whether—this is the vital point upon which the House should focus—they should save at all. Each time they introduce a new means-testing proposal, the Government make the situation worse. There has been one such proposal a month since the autumn, when I found myself on the Front Bench.

Every time that means-testing is extended, the Government raise the income threshold below which it is not sensible for people to save because they will simply deprive themselves of thousands of pounds of means-tested benefits. Even when the return begins to be

positive, it will be pathetically low. People would be better off spending the money and enjoying it rather than saving, at great sacrifice, for absolutely nothing or at slightly higher levels for a derisory and miserable sum in retirement. The fact is that the Government must focus on reality. The reality is that, if you go on means-testing in the way you are, you will do irreparable damage to saving in this country and you will put yourself in a position—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The hon. Gentleman must use the correct parliamentary language.

Mr. Davies: I am using the word "you" in the impersonal sense. If you prefer, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I could use the third person impersonal and say "one". However, I find it more natural to use "you" in the impersonal sense.

Means-testing will irreparably damage savings. The majority of people on or below average incomes—I think that average earnings are £15,000 to £18,000—will have to consider carefully whether they should save in those circumstances. If the Government desire people to save, they will have only two choices: the first technique is compulsion, which they have rightly rejected—and we reject also—and the second is to bamboozle those on modest earnings to save modest amounts. That is the exercise in which the Government have engaged so disgracefully this afternoon—and that is an exercise that we reject.

6.45 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Stephen Timms): The whole House will have enjoyed this speech by the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies). It was a bravura performance delivered with the verve and gusto that we associate with the hon. Gentleman and that we all enjoy—but that might also be described kindly as displaying a light grasp of the details of the Government's proposals.

I first became aware of the hon. Gentleman's light grasp of the details when he and I were interviewed separately on Radio Newcastle about the problems with the NIRS2 computer system, which have affected many pensioners around the country. Many hon. Members will not have had the opportunity to hear the interview that the hon. Gentleman gave, but it certainly merits a wider audience. The contract for the computer system was signed by the previous Government in 1995, with a view to the system being up and running by February 1997. Therefore, I was intrigued to hear the hon. Gentleman tell the presenter on Radio Newcastle on 10 December last year:

"Oh, no, no, no . . . this contract was signed in the autumn of this year, more than a year after the last election."

The presenter gently pointed out to the hon. Gentleman that it was the Conservatives who had brought in the contractor, to which he responded:

"This is quite absurd. If the Government are saying this then they really, absolutely plumbed the depths . . . This is the most sensational view—this is the most extraordinary dereliction of responsibility on their part".

The presenter made one more half-hearted attempt to point out the facts, to which the hon. Gentleman replied:

"No, no, no, no, no."

The correct answer was "Yes"—but that in no way detracted from our enjoyment of the hon. Gentleman's spirited contribution on that occasion, or on this.

It is also true that the hon. Gentleman's cavalier disregard for the Government's actual proposals in no way detracted from our enjoyment of the hon. Gentleman's swashbuckling denunciation of them this afternoon. However, it is important to refer to what is really in the Green Paper. I refer the hon. Gentleman to the clear statement on page 42 of that document regarding carers. The position of carers is greatly enhanced by our proposal regarding the state second pension. Our proposals pose no threat to group personal pensions and nothing undermines them. A proper collectively run scheme may be more attractive to many people, but nothing in our proposals undermines what is currently possible under personal pension arrangements.

Mr. Duncan Smith: The Minister started his speech by having a little fun about the NIRS2 computer system. Perhaps he would like to explain to pensioners why, back in September, the Secretary of State said that the problems would be sorted out in two weeks, why nothing else was heard from him until January, and why, last week, the Minister said that it will be many months before the difficulties are resolved. Regardless of how the problems occurred, should he not have done people a favour and eased their worries by telling them what was going on?

Mr. Timms: We have been absolutely frank about what has been happening throughout this process. We have been picking up the pieces and sorting out the problems that we inherited from the previous Government. I wish to comment about another issue that was picked up frequently in the debate.

Mr. Leigh: This Government keep blaming the previous Government. Has the Minister read the National Audit Office report, published in May 1997, which says that the procurement was "well managed"—they are its words. It also says that the shortlisting process was well managed to produce three credible bidders. The problems have originated since this Government were elected.

Mr. Timms: No, no. *[Interruption.]* I have read the report. The fact is that the system of commission had to be operational by February 1997, but parts of it are becoming operational only now. We have had to sort out the mess.

I want to comment on an issue that a number of hon. Members have mentioned, and of which the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford makes much—means-testing. The state second pension will be a 100 per cent. contributory scheme. The whole point of what we are proposing is to ensure that—unlike the position that we inherited from the previous Government, where people could work and pay contributions throughout their working lives and still retire directly on to means-tested income support—the state second pension means that everybody in such a position retires with a pension above the minimum income guarantee level, which will itself be uprated over time, in line with earnings.

This is an imaginative, effective and affordable programme, which is why it has been so widely welcomed in the pensions industry and elsewhere. There is, of course, a pension policy that would generate

[Mr. Timms]

means-testing on a massive scale—basic pension plus. I was intrigued that the hon. Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) tentatively expressed some support for that policy, but we do not know whether it is still the official policy of the Conservative party. We have not been informed of that this afternoon, and it would be helpful if we could be told.

If the Opposition are arguing that the least well-off should not share in rising prosperity, and that the minimum income guarantee should not be uprated over time in line with earnings, let them say so. That is not the view of Labour Members, nor is it the view among pensioners.

We have had an interesting debate and a number of thoughtful contributions were made. The hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) made some interesting points on the future of the basic state pension, and I am grateful to him for drawing attention to the review of saving limits for the minimum income guarantee. I agree that that is the right thing to do. Winter fuel payments have been popular among pensioners and I certainly support them, as do the great majority of people.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) made a thoughtful and constructive speech. He told us that it would be his last off-message speech; I am not sure what he meant by that. I want to comment on a couple of points that he made. He will agree that the effect of our proposals will be to reduce the number of people who would end up on means-tested benefit when they retire and so reduce the problem, which he highlighted, of people feeling that it is not worth saving.

I agree with my right hon. Friend that we need to strengthen the arrangements for occupational pensions and the Green Paper, and the subsequent consultative paper, contain important proposals to achieve that. On the question of churn, which he raised, the Financial Services Authority is aware of the problem and will be introducing proposals to address it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, South (Mr. Sutcliffe) did the House a great service by reminding hon. Members of the record of the previous Government. He also elicited a helpful explanation of why so few Conservative Members were present during the debate. Apparently they were at a Conservative party rally. For quite a long time, there were more Liberal Democrat Members than Conservative Back Benchers in the Chamber, even though the Conservatives initiated the debate. Indeed, at one time, no Conservative Front Bencher was present.

My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Miss Smith) made some telling points about the position of many pensioners. She was absolutely right to welcome the proposed link with earnings for the minimum income guarantee and right to spotlight the problem facing self-employed people, which stakeholder pensions address.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Kali Mountford) for highlighting the work that is being done in the pilot schemes to encourage people to take up the minimum income guarantee and to draw attention to the benefits of stakeholder pensions for the self-employed.

Let me conclude by summarising our proposals. The position we have inherited is that we are heading for a situation where, in 50 years, one in three people retiring will go straight on to income support. Today's pensioners are too often without security. As a result of the pensions mis-selling scandal presided over by the previous Government, people do not trust the system and too few people who could afford a funded pension do not have one.

Mr. Quentin Davies: A few moments ago, the Minister said that it was not true, as I had contended, that group personal pensions would not qualify as stakeholder pensions. I refer him to page 53 of his document and paragraph 29, which states:

> "Existing personal pensions will not therefore be able to describe themselves as stakeholder pension schemes."

That appears clearly in the document. If there is confusion, it is the fault of the Minister's document.

Mr. Timms: No. What the document says is absolutely right. Of course group personal pensions will not qualify as stakeholder pensions; they are personal pensions—they are different. I repeat the point that I have made to the hon. Gentleman: nothing in the document will make it any more difficult to provide a group personal pension than it is today.

Our proposals in the Green Paper are based on the principle that those who can afford to save should do so, but that those who cannot afford to save should also be able to look forward to security in retirement. It rests on three key proposals: the minimum income guarantee, the state second pension and a new system of funded stakeholder pension schemes.

The first element is the minimum income guarantee: £75 per week for a single pensioner from April, which will be available to all those who meet the conditions for entitlement to income support. It will be increased every year, and our long-term aim is that it should rise in line with earnings so that even the least-well-off pensioners will be able to share the benefits of rising national prosperity. It is fundamental to those proposals that the benefits should be enjoyed by the many and not just the few.

We announced in the Green Paper that we will consider how we can relax the savings limit and consider the possibility of introducing an income disregard. We want to encourage saving and ensure that there is not a penalty against pensioners for saving. We will introduce measures to achieve that.

Looking forward, under the policies that we inherited, we would have been heading for a position where many people would retire on to a pension that would leave them—

Miss Kirkbride: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Timms: I cannot. Time is running short and I apologise to the hon. Lady.

People who have worked and paid contributions throughout their working lives would go straight on to income support. That would be the case for people earning less than £15,000 a year even if they had been in the state earnings-related pension scheme throughout their working lives. How can we instead ensure that people who have

paid and contributed throughout their working lives can be assured of a retirement income above the minimum income guarantee level, outside means testing?

We want to reduce dependence on means-tested benefit in retirement. That is the objective we have set ourselves, and I believe that the whole House will share it. Some people have suggested that the way to achieve that is to restore the link between the basic state pension and earnings rather than prices. That would be an immensely expensive measure, but a large group of people—those earning, throughout their lives, between the lower earnings level and about £6,000 per year—would retire directly on to income support, unless they had made their own provision. Despite the huge expense, it would not achieve what we want.

What about increasing compulsion? The hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) talked about that. At the moment, there is a significant degree of compulsion, and people are required to contribute 4.6 per cent. of their pay into SERPS or a contracted-out scheme. If we doubled that figure to 9 per cent., people earning less than £9,000 a year would still retire on to the minimum income guarantee level.

Restoring the earnings link would not work. Increasing compulsion would not work. We need what might be called a third way—the state second pension to replace SERPS. That is what we have proposed, and it will achieve the objective that we have set. The first two pillars of our proposal are the minimum income guarantee and the state second pension. The third pillar—the key pillar—is stakeholder pension schemes, which will be secure, low cost and flexible.

We also want to encourage the development of occupational schemes which, as has been said a number of times in the debate, are one of the great welfare success stories of this century. We want to encourage people to join an occupational scheme, if they are able to do so, and to boost confidence in good schemes through a quality in pensions accreditation programme.

We want to achieve regulatory simplification and, in a parallel exercise to the Green Paper, we have issued a consultation document on our proposals. In a very simple, powerful innovation, we have proposed that every pension scheme member should receive a combined pension forecast every year which tells them exactly where they stand.

Our proposals represent a redrawing of the contract for pensions between the state, the private sector and the individual. Those who can save for their retirement have the responsibility to do so, and the state must provide effective security for those who cannot. That is the principle on which our reforms are built and I take pride in commending them to the House.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 185, Noes 327.

Division No. 54] **[7 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forsythe, Clifford
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Rt Hon Sir Alastair
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heath, Rt Hon Sir Edward
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thompson, William

Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Trimble, Rt Hon David
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Sir David Madel and
Mr. Stephen Day.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Caborn, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chisholm, Malcolm
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Etherington, Bill
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fatchett, Derek
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry

Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Welsh, Andrew
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Greg Pope and
Mr. Clive Betts.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments) and agreed to.*

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House commends the Government's approach to pensions reform, set out in its Green Paper, Partnership in Pensions; congratulates the Government on its determination to end the scandal of pensions mis-selling and its plans to strengthen the financial regulatory system; commends the Government on its commitment to economic stability and low inflation, which helps pensioners; believes that its reforms to the corporate tax system, which will result in the lowest-ever rate of Corporation Tax, will be in the long-term interests of companies, shareholders and pensioners; and approves of the Government's introduction of the Minimum Pension Guarantee, Winter Fuel Payments, the re-introduction of free eye tests and commitment to concessionary travel for the elderly as part of its strategy to provide security in retirement.

Planning

[Relevant documents: Tenth Report from the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, Session 1997–98, on Housing (HC 495-I) and the Government's Response thereto (Cm 4080).]

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): I advise the House that Madam Speaker has selected the amendment standing in the name of the Prime Minister.

7.13 pm

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): I beg to move,

That this House regrets decisions by the Government to allow large-scale development in the countryside; deplores the fact that the Government has failed to publish revised planning guidance, despite its promise to do so 12 months ago, which has led to further erosion of the green belt and greenfield sites; expresses concern at the confusion that will be caused by the role given to the regional development agencies in planning issues; and urges the Government to enhance the protection of the countryside, while encouraging urban regeneration, by ensuring an increasing share of new housing is built on brownfield sites.

I make no apologies for the fact that this will be the fourth debate in a little over a year in which the House has had the opportunity to discuss planning issues, primarily the on-going destruction of the green belt, the erosion of green-field sites and the threat to our countryside. Our alarm, shared by millions of people, is at the fact that the Government refuse to act to stop the constant erosion of the green belt and green-field sites and the continued concreting over of land which, once lost, can never be recovered. That is environmental vandalism of the worst kind, and the Government seem to be paralysed into doing nothing about it.

Under this Government, the pattern has become all too familiar. The Secretary of State approves the concreting over of vast tracts of green-field land and building on vast tracts of green belt. He orders county councils to plan for more new homes, overrules his inspectors if they disagree with him and uses the courts to back up his bully-boy tactics. In the light of the Government's behaviour and record, I question whether they understand what the green belt is and why it was put in place.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Burns: No, I wish to make a little more progress. If the hon. Gentleman still wishes to intervene later, I will consider it.

For the benefit of the Minister, I should briefly explain that modern green-belt policy was established in the 1950s and is enshrined in planning policy guidance note 2. The fundamental aim of the green-belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open. I remind Ministers that the key quality of the green belt is its permanence, and that that should be altered only in exceptional circumstances.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): Has my hon. Friend noticed that, in the case of Stevenage, the Government have allowed the building of more than 10,000 homes on the green belt and then pretended that they have protected the green belt by extending it somewhere else where it does not provide protection

[Mr. John Gummer]

against urban sprawl? That is sleight of hand such has never been seen before, but this Government seem to have become adept at it.

Mr. Burns: With my right hon. Friend's distinguished record as Secretary of State for the Environment, one would expect him to be able to see through at a moment's glance the flimsy and veiled excuses that the Government use. I assure him that, later in my speech, Stevenage will not escape my notice—nor will West Sussex, Newcastle and Sutton Coldfield.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Nick Raynsford) *rose—*

Mr. Sheerman *rose—*

Mr. Burns: I shall give way to the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman), because I promised to do so.

Mr. Sheerman: May I jog the hon. Gentleman's memory? Those of us who have been in the House some time remember the destruction of the planning procedures under the previous Government. We knew that every appeal that was turned down by local councillors would be allowed by the previous Government, because they believed that market forces should rule and, every time, green-belt land was built on. The destruction of our countryside happened under the previous Administration.

Mr. Burns: I bitterly regret giving way to the hon. Gentleman, because of the utter claptrap that he has just given the House. I remind him that it was under the Conservative Government that we doubled the size of the green belt, leaving it almost the size of the Principality of Wales.

Mr. Raynsford: As the hon. Gentleman mentioned Stevenage in response to an intervention by the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), would he care to confirm that, in 1994, when that right hon. Gentleman was Secretary of State for the Environment, 23 hectares of green-belt land in Stevenage were released for housing with the knowledge and approval of the previous Government?

Hon. Members: Oh!

Mr. Gummer *rose—*

Mr. Burns: I do not wish to get involved in an internal brawl, but I shall give way to my right hon. Friend.

Mr. Gummer: I wonder whether my hon. Friend would remind the Minister, who has had the chance to refresh his memory on the point, that not only was all the release of land in Stevenage under this Government backed by the Labour council there—so was every release of land in Stevenage in the past 20 years. The Minister has had 20 civil servants to find his one point, but I remember the issue clearly because the council was so bad.

Mr. Burns: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for that point and I shall put the Minister's mind at rest by confirming that I shall return to the subject of Stevenage later.

Ministers do not seem to understand the issue and that is one of the main reasons for the way in which they have behaved in the past 20 months.

The Minister for the Environment displayed his ignorance of planning policy guidance note 2 when he said:

"The purpose of the green belt is to provide an area surrounding cities for recreation in open countryside, but as populations grow, as towns change in size, and as new towns are built, it is perfectly reasonable to intervene in the green belt if the overall impact is to increase its size."—[*Official Report*, 29 July 1998; Vol. 317, c. 437.]

I am sorry that the right hon. Gentleman is not here, but I must explain to Ministers that it is not perfectly reasonable to intervene in the green belt—on the contrary, what is happening up and down the country is totally wrong.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): Does my hon. Friend agree that we are talking not about Stevenage but about the land next to it, between Stevenage, Hitchin and Letchworth in my constituency? The Government will create a sprawling conurbation in north Hertfordshire that the people do not want and have campaigned against. It is a disgrace. To talk about 23 hectares as though it is 800 is a laugh.

Mr. Burns: My hon. Friend makes his point tellingly. He probably knows that his concerns are shared not only by Conservatives in his county but by Labour councillors.

The Minister for the Environment should consider his Department's PPG2 and learn that the purposes of the green belt are to prevent urban sprawl, to prevent towns from coalescing, to protect historic towns and to encourage urban regeneration. When we were in government, we lived up to that policy. The green belt doubled in size in our time and we left in place a designated green-belt area the size of Wales.

What have this Government done? They have certainly lived up to the Deputy Prime Minister's proud boast, which may have been a Freudian slip, when he said:

"The green belt is a Labour achievement—and we intend to build upon it."

He and his party have certainly lived up to that boast.

The Deputy Prime Minister has given the go-ahead for 10,000 new homes on green-belt land near Stevenage. In the face of opposition from the Conservatives, a Liberal Democrat-Labour pact dragooned the proposal through Hertfordshire county council, despite the opposition of the Labour leader on North Hertfordshire district council, who said:

"We feel very let down."

Is anyone surprised? He continued:

"The Government claims to be committed to protecting the environment and regeneration of urban areas and now we have them supporting plans to rape 2,000 acres of greenbelt."

That is a damning indictment of new Labour actions by a new Labour council leader.

Barbara Follett (Stevenage) *rose—*

Mr. Burns: The Secretary of State approved 2,500 more homes in the green belt outside Newcastle, despite there being 4,000 empty homes in one part of the city alone. That decision was greeted by the off-message hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins) with the reflection that it would accelerate the decline of inner-city areas such as his constituency.

Barbara Follett: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. As he mentioned my constituency several times, it is the least that he could do. If the Conservative party is so keen on preserving the green belt, why did the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), in one of his last decisions as Secretary of State for the Environment, release 50 acres of metropolitan green-belt land in Surrey and another 428 hectares to Manchester airport?

Mr. Burns: Oh dear. Good try, must do better. The hon. Lady has her crib sheet, but I am afraid that, in cases such as Manchester airport, there are very exceptional circumstances. What we decry is the fact that the Government have brushed aside very exceptional circumstances. It is now almost the norm that anyone who wants to build on green-belt land, can. *[Interruption.]* If the Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning listens, he will hear more examples of what has gone on in the past 20 months under this Government in respect of the desecration of the green belt and green-field sites.

Mr. Gummer: Will my hon. Friend tell the hon. Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett) that airports can hardly be built on brown-field sites in the middle of a city? If she fought for her constituency, no homes would be built in the green belt; they would be built on brown-field sites.

Mr. Burns: I am sure that the hon. Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett) heard those comments.

The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central said that the decision in Newcastle would accelerate the decline of inner-city areas such as his constituency.

Mr. Jim Cousins (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): The master plan that implements the 2,400 houses in the green belt is now before the Minister. I have great hopes that he will put some brakes on approval of the master plan to allow some checks and balances to be introduced so that the release of land will not compromise the regeneration of the inner city, which is my policy and that of my Government.

Mr. Burns: I am interested by that, even if it is slightly off message. No doubt the Minister heard that plea. When the hon. Gentleman at first criticised the decision by saying that it would accelerate the problems of inner-city areas such as his, he rightly, as a good constituency Member, went on to say that he would fight the proposal to the best of his abilities. I respect him for that. I suspect that the controllers in Millbank will not be thrilled but as a constituency Member he is right to fight Government proposals to do something on green-belt land that could accelerate the problems of the inner city in Newcastle.

It is owing to the direct intervention of the Deputy Prime Minister in West Sussex that the total number of houses that it has to build by 2011 has been increased from 37,900 to 58,700. Despite the right hon. Gentleman's lofty statement,

"planning will remain clearly under local control",

to achieve the target, in defiance of the local authority, he overruled his own inspector and the decision ended up in the courts. True to form, he managed to upset, among others, the Labour leader on West Sussex county council, who declared:

"This is the starkest possible illustration that the Government has no intention of trying to provide a greater share of . . . new homes on brownfield sites rather than on greenfield sites in the countryside."

Similarly, the west midlands has not escaped the Deputy Prime Minister's attention. Up to his usual tricks, he once again overruled his Department's independent planning inspector to allow 150 acres of green-belt farmland in Sutton Coldfield to be used for development. Interestingly, the land was owned by Labour-controlled Birmingham city council.

It would be unfair to accuse Environment Ministers of not always taking a close interest in the green belt. That would be a travesty because we all know of the keen interest of the hon. Member for Mansfield (Mr. Meale) through his assiduous lobbying of Environment Ministers and officials to promote two major schemes in green belt in Barnet—140 miles from his constituency—when he was Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Secretary of State.

Criticism of the Secretary of State's actions has not been restricted to Labour councillors whose areas have been adversely affected by his environmentally damaging decisions. The Labour-controlled Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs has been equally scathing. In its 10th report on housing last year, it described the answers that one Minister gave as, "vacuous and disingenuous". The whole report was a thinly veiled attack on the dithering inaction that characterises the Government's attitudes to housing provision and the green-belt and brown-field sites policy. The Select Committee described the proposals in the White Paper "Planning for the Communities of the Future" as, "well-intentioned, but vague" and concluded,

"we do not believe that they will be adequate to achieve their aims".

I suspect that time will prove the Committee's analysis to be spot on.

The challenge to the Government on whether they will halt their environmental vandalism will come with the 4.4 million new households that are projected to be needed by 2016, although there are strong rumours that the DETR will revise that figure upwards to 5 million houses before Easter. The House would be grateful if the Minister could confirm in his reply whether there is any truth in those rumours, or at least clarify his position.

We have always maintained that as much of that house building as possible should be on brown-field sites. In our manifesto for the last general election, we called for a target of 60 per cent. brown-field site building. In February 1998, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition proposed that the figure should be revised upwards to 66 per cent.

[Mr. Burns]

Interestingly, the Government reversed their position in the Secretary of State's statement in February 1998, when the right hon. Gentleman increased—

The Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning (Mr. Richard Caborn): Rubbish.

Mr. Burns: It is a statement of fact that the Secretary of State revised his figures upwards from 50 per cent. to 60 per cent. in February 1998. Ironically, only a year before, his own junior Minister, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford), had told *Planning Week* that a target of 60 per cent. would be "a recipe for disaster". I am grateful that the hon. Gentleman is here. Perhaps he can enlighten us on how he has managed to square his views with his boss's change of heart. I suspect that if there is one right hon. Gentleman who does not take kindly to having his policies described by one of his junior Ministers as "a recipe for disaster" it is the Deputy Prime Minister.

Achieving the 60 per cent. target needs an urgent revision of PPG3 because that guidance will set out the details of the policy and the sequential approach to housing sites. The revision was announced in February 1998, but one year on, virtually nothing has happened. No consultation draft PPG3 has appeared. The Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning promised it to my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) in time for his public examination, which will take place next week.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): My hon. Friend might like to know that the examination in public for East Anglia began yesterday. I will be giving evidence to it next Tuesday. On 22 October, the Minister promised me,

"I will ensure that he"—

meaning me—

"has the revised PPG3 in his hands".—[*Official Report*, 22 October 1998; Vol. 317, c. 1447.]

That simply has not happened. How can certainty, which the Minister says is important, be achieved at such a regional examination without the essential guidance?

Mr. Burns: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, but I have some sad news for him. He will not have the consultation draft in time for his public examination. Officials at DETR said only late last week, following a telephone inquiry, that the draft that the Minister promised my hon. Friend in time for his examination is likely to appear in about a month's time.

As the Minister knows, it usually takes 12 months from publication of a consultation draft to the production of the final draft. It is likely that the revised PPG3 will not appear this millennium. The delay will have a significant impact. Housing starts are running at around 150,000 houses a year. The delay in PPG3 means that it is difficult to apply the new approach to planning permissions and development plans. The effective delay of the 60 per cent. target by a year will mean 15,000 extra dwellings on green-field sites. At a typical density figure of 25 dwellings to the hectare, that will mean that an extra 600 hectares per year will be lost to housing development.

The dithering and delays on PPG3 are a damning indictment of this Government and their approach in the past 20 months. As they dither, more building takes place on green-field sites. Their response has been too little too late. As the Select Committee points out, the Government's 60 per cent. target is weakened by phasing it in over 10 years. While they dither, local authorities and regional planning conferences are expected to apply the old figures to their plans. The Minister's hollow words about "bottom-up planning" have been exposed as a sham by the constant interference of the Secretary of State in local decisions.

Tonight, I hope that the Minister will tell the House when the draft version of PPG3 is to be produced, when the final version will be produced and why it is taking so long for the Government to revise their guidance.

Finally, on the role of regional development agencies in the planning process, interestingly the DETR's figures show that, out of a total of 103 members on the eight boards, nearly one in three are Labour placemen, with 32 members having Labour party connections, eight having Liberal Democrat connections and six having Conservative connections. It certainly seems like jobs for the boys. Notwithstanding that, it would be interesting to learn more about the role of the RDAs in planning. The legislation is extraordinarily confusing about precisely what they will do. Will they simply muddy the water by interfering in the normal process, thus bringing a system that is already bursting at the seams into greater difficulties? Will they be able to influence Ministers in any way to prevent erosion of the green belt and green-field sites? Or will they be a white elephant with no real role to play in planning, simply causing confusion, trouble and conflict between the regional planning conferences and the local authorities?

I said that, in the past 20 months the green belt had been attacked and green-field sites had been destroyed owing to the dithering and, sometimes, the direct intervention of Ministers, who pay lip service to environmental protection but do nothing to stop the destruction of the green belt. As the Council for the Protection of Rural England stated, in addition to all the damage caused so far, large tracts of green-field land in Hampshire and Devon are under threat of building as a result of Government pressure for more housing. In Yorkshire, Humberside and the north-east, there are plans to release green-belt land and green-field sites for development. In Staffordshire and around Bristol, there are plans to release green belt for development. New statistics show that there has been no increase in the amount of housing built on recycled land.

Enough is enough. It is time that the Government did something rather than mouthing pious platitudes as our countryside is turned into a concrete jungle.

7.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Nick Raynsford): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"welcomes the Government's continued commitment to protecting the countryside, including green belts, and promoting sustainable regeneration in towns and cities; recognises that the Government's decentralised and integrated policy approach, as stated in Planning for Communities of the Future, Modernising the Planning System and A New Deal for Transport, is helping to achieve more

sustainable and equitable patterns of urban and rural development; welcomes the Government's commitment strictly to control development in the open countryside and to increase the proportion of new housing on previously-developed land in urban areas, smaller towns and villages from 40 per cent in the mid-1980s to 60 per cent; recognises the need to replace the previous predict and provide approach to the issue of household growth with a more flexible decentralised system, involving realistic regional targets for the building of new homes on recycled land, tighter controls on urban sprawl, new regional and housing planning guidance to ensure the adoption of sustainable solutions to housing development and more rigorous and detailed assessment of land availability; and believes that the Government's inter-linked policies for urban regeneration and protection of the countryside will enhance the quality of life for people in both rural and urban areas."

I particularly welcome this debate as a further opportunity to set out the Government's achievements in planning for the communities of the future. After 18 years of Tory drift and indecision, characterised first by laissez-faire, during which any development on green fields or green belt was regarded as not only acceptable but desirable by the bigots of the right, and latterly by a death-bed repentance—years in which the countryside and the green belt were sacrificed again and again by Ministers in the former Government who are now masquerading as their defenders—this Government are moving ahead purposefully with their policies of sustainable development and with a modernised planning framework. Over the past 20 months, we have made considerable progress on developing a coherent policy that reconciles the need to provide sufficient land for housing with protecting the countryside from unsuitable development.

Before I set out the Governments' policy and achievements, let us reflect briefly on our inheritance. We inherited from the previous Government a record that entirely belies their rhetoric this evening. Not only did the previous Government preside over a housing crisis, with the worst levels of homelessness and house repossessions in any years since the war, but they allowed extensive development all over the countryside. During the decade 1985 to 1995, they achieved on average only 42 per cent. of new development on recycled or brown-field sites. They were also profligate with the green belt, releasing on appeal more than 500 hectares for development in their last year in office alone, and presiding over the redesignation of a further 700 hectares in that same year.

The hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) said that, in exceptional circumstances, the release of land in the green belt might be acceptable, but let us look at the Tory record and see how exceptional the circumstances were in the Conservatives' last year in office. In July 1996, the then Secretary of State agreed the release of 23 hectares of green belt in Caddington near Luton against the recommendation of the inspector, who had recommended refusal of planning permission. In March 1997, he approved the release of 50 hectares of land at Mizens farm, Woking for a development relating to a motor car which featured in the disastrous election campaign of the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major): the wheels fell off both the car and the campaign. Two months earlier, in January 1997, 428 hectares were approved at Manchester airport.

Those decisions were made by the Secretary of State on appeal, but in that same period he was also aware of, and presided over, the following additional redesignations of green belt: in Dartford, 250 hectares approved for development; in south Staffordshire, 148 hectares; in Cannock Chase, 71 hectares; and in Solihull, 260 hectares. The total amount of green belt approved for development use in the last year of the Tory Government was more than 1,200 hectares. That is their record, so it is utterly hypocritical of them to pretend now that their record on that issue is anything other than shameful.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): I was elected in April 1997 in a constituency that falls almost entirely within the green belt. I want to see Government action, not hear Government rhetoric. I shall be just as critical as the Minister of the previous Government's record, but I want action from the Labour Government. All we have heard so far is rhetoric and all we have seen is the massive extension of building on the green belt.

Mr. Raynsford: So far, all we have heard is a brief correction of the record, so as to cure the selective amnesia of Conservative Members who prefer to forget the Conservative Government's record. However, I shall go on to set out in detail the Government's proposals to provide a proper framework for planning that reconciles the pressures on the green belt and green-field land with our need to provide housing.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): Speaking of selective amnesia, does the Minister recall the date 23 January 1997, when he told *Planning Week* that there was "absolutely no doubt" that the only realistic way to meet the housing figure was to develop new towns and settlements? Does he recall telling *Planning Week* that? Does he stand by that statement, or does he now regret having made it?

Mr. Raynsford: No, I do not. I recognise that there is a role for several different vehicles in ensuring that we meet housing needs. New settlements are potentially one of those vehicles and I make no apology for that. We attempt to address the issues realistically and sensibly, whereas the Opposition spout rhetoric that is totally at variance with the Conservatives' actions in office.

Mrs. Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): That rhetoric is indeed synthetic. Is my hon. Friend aware that our hon. Friend the Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning was recently involved in the commencement of the clearing of Seaton barracks, which is one of the many Ministry of Defence properties that we have been trying to put to use? The previous Government's record was absolutely abysmal; had they taken planning issues seriously, they would have taken the issue of former MOD sites far more seriously than they did.

Mr. Raynsford: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend, who has highlighted one of the positive steps that the Labour Government are taking to ensure that opportunities are grasped to bring into use currently unused sites in urban areas and brown-field land, instead of building on green-field sites.

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Raynsford: I am having some difficulty meeting the objective set by the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt). I shall give way to the hon. Lady, but then I must make progress.

Mrs. Gorman: I thank the Minister for giving way. Would he dispute the fact that, within central London, approximately 6 square miles of brown-field land has been identified? Most of the sites lie within the areas of Labour-controlled councils, which have refused to allow development, despite the fact that some of the land has been left lying since the second world war?

Mr. Raynsford: I do not dispute the fact that there is a substantial number of brown-field sites in London, as there are in other urban areas. It is precisely to get such sites into use that we are taking the steps that I shall set out tonight.

The Labour Government also inherited a consultation paper "Household growth--Where shall we live?", which illustrated the death-bed repentance which I mentioned earlier. It tentatively posed the question whether to raise the target for building new housing on previously developed land from 50 to 60 per cent., but set out no detailed proposals, let alone a well-thought-out way to achieve that. Since May 1997, we have set about filling that vacuum: first, by confirming the 60 per cent. target for new houses on recycled brown-field sites; and, secondly, by producing a comprehensive approach to developing our towns and cities and reducing the number of green-field sites that will be needed for development.

Mr. Burns: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Raynsford: No, I must make some progress. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will bear with me as I do so.

The Government set out our position in last February's policy statement "Planning for the Communities of the Future". We proposed to move away from the previous Administration's predict and provide approach to a new approach based on the principles of plan, monitor, and manage. We recommended devolving decision making by relying more heavily on joint regional planning conference/Government office assessments of housing requirements to ensure greater local accountability and local responsibility for deciding final figures and monitoring the outcome. We also announced our intention to revise Government planning policy guidance for housing—planning policy guidance note 3—on which a consultation draft is to be published shortly. That guidance will provide sharper and more rigorous definitions of previously used land and urban capacity, explain how the new land recycling targets are to work and explain how a sequential approach and phasing of local authority land release will work.

Last year, the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee gave further attention to the issue. After a thorough review, the Committee concluded that we were going in the right direction. However, I know that there are still people who need to be convinced. All those who have looked carefully at the way in which the future housing requirement projections are made have come to the same conclusion as the Committee: that the methodology is basically sound and there is no better framework immediately available. However, that does not prevent the flat-earthers on the Opposition Benches from raucously denouncing the figures, even though—as their selective amnesia has obviously caused them to forget—the figures were produced in the lifetime of the previous Conservative Government and published by that Government.

We want to maximise the use of previously developed land. To realise that aim, we have adopted a national target of 60 per cent. of all additional housing being built on previously developed land.

Mr. Burns: Given the fact that Government policy has changed to having a 60 per cent. target, does the Minister still stand by his pre-election statement to a magazine that to move from a 50 per cent. target to a 60 per cent. target would be a "recipe for disaster"?

Mr. Raynsford: The response that I gave, which I am happy to defend, was that plucking a figure out of thin air, as the previous Government did, was a recipe for disaster. One cannot plan by that means, although the Opposition have a lot of experience of it. They have plucked from the air figures of 60 per cent., then 75 per cent., and the Leader of the Opposition has produced a figure of 66 per cent. No one knows the basis for any of those numbers because no serious research or analysis has been conducted. The problem with the Opposition is that they can come up with only rhetoric, not substance. If the electorate are to have confidence in the political process, it is fundamental that targets set by Government are soundly based on a proper understanding of what is feasible and attainable. That is this Government's approach.

That is our baseline position—if it is possible to do better we will, but first we must establish what is feasible. We have put in place the national land use database, which will provide the first countrywide assessment of what previously developed land is currently vacant and available. Given the Opposition's comments, is it not extraordinary that, when the Labour party came into office, there was no way of knowing where the recyclable land was or how much brown-field land was available? There were no records: the Conservatives had been in government for 18 years and had taken no practical steps to implement a proper policy for brown-field development.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): Will my hon. Friend confirm that not only were no national data collected under the Conservative Government, but local authorities had never been asked whether they had vacant land that could be recycled?

Mr. Raynsford: My hon. Friend has a lot of experience in this matter and he makes an extremely valid point.

The national land use database will be published this spring. For the first time, the database will give local authorities information from which to derive their own regional and local targets. With that information, we will expect the regional planning conferences to produce challenging, but realistic, targets for their regions.

The Government are systematically putting the mechanisms in place. The urban task force, headed by Lord Rogers, is exploring how best we can bring vacant

or under-used urban brown-field sites back into use. The task force has already presented its interim findings and will report fully later this summer. It will undoubtedly provide much helpful guidance, for developers and local authorities alike, on how to make the optimum use of opportunities for recycling urban land and buildings.

We believe that higher densities for housing developments may be appropriate in suitable locations, such as near urban centres with good transport links. However, they must be designed to a high standard and provide a good-quality environment. We are not advocating insensitive "town cramming". We are not suggesting building on open spaces and playing fields in urban areas, or at very high densities, but we are suggesting making better use of land. Those who support reducing the impact of the countryside should support that approach.

Above all, the challenge is how to make towns and cities places where people will want and choose to live—a theme that will run through our forthcoming White Paper on urban matters. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister set the tone by calling last year for an urban renaissance. That will need positive and proactive planning at the local level, with more imagination and vision. Focusing development back into our towns and cities will require much more creative thinking about "place making". Design will be a critical element. In many cases, it will mean the gradual remodelling of existing communities, but there will also be opportunities for larger projects, such as urban villages, of which the millennium village in my constituency of Greenwich and Woolwich will be a flagship example.

I also welcome the opportunity today to reiterate the Government's policy on the green belt. The green belt is an essential and very important tool of planning policy, and one to which the Government remain totally committed. The strong presumption against inappropriate development in the green belt also remains. Such development would be permissible only where very special circumstances justifying development outweighed the harm to the green belt.

However, we must also demolish a few myths about the green belt. The green belt is not being reduced. Since May 1997, approximately 30,000 hectares have been earmarked for addition to the green belt. That is an area three times the size of Bristol. The green belt now covers more than 12 per cent. of England.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): I understand that the Minister is extending the green belt. New rural land is being taken out to add to the green belt, while land that was to have been used only in exceptional circumstances is being swallowed up. Is that not a bit pointless?

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman is a little impatient. If he will bear with me, he will hear a number of remarks on those specific matters. I accept that they are difficult issues, and that they must be tackled honestly and realistically, not in a facile manner.

I have emphasised that the green belt is not being reduced. I also wish to stress that green belt does not mean green field. Green-field land is any undeveloped land. Not all green belt is free from development: often the development was there before the green belt was defined. Development proposals in the green belt frequently involve the redevelopment of previously used sites. It is established policy to try to ensure that such redevelopment yields environmental improvements, compared with the development that it replaces.

Equally, "green belt" is not a landscape designation. It does not imply an area of outstanding natural beauty. All kinds and qualities of land, including derelict sites, may be in the green belt. Most green belt is ordinary agricultural land. Less than 5 per cent. of green belt overlaps with statutory national landscape or wildlife designations.

Green belt is not a national designation: it is primarily a local designation. Decisions about the setting and altering of boundaries, or about permitting development, rest primarily with local authorities. However, the Government attach considerable importance to green belts, where they have been established. That is why we have national planning policy guidance, indicating the weight that we attach to their continued protection.

Mr. Lansley: Given the importance that the Minister ascribes to the green belt, and given his explanation of its purpose, will he communicate with Labour-controlled Cambridge city council, which proposes to swallow up green-belt land in the south of the city? Part of the land affected is in my constituency, and the council justifies its proposal by saying that the landscape would be enhanced.

Mr. Raynsford: If the hon. Gentleman will bear with me, I shall come to precisely that point. The issue is interesting and difficult. There is substantial economic growth in Cambridge, where green-belt designated land surrounds the area tightly. That poses special problems, with which I shall deal in a moment.

Let us set out what green belts should be. Green belts should fulfil the objectives and purposes of PPG2: to prevent urban sprawl; to stop towns merging with one another; to safeguard the countryside against encroachment; to preserve the setting of historic towns and to encourage urban regeneration. As far as possible, green belts should, among other things, benefit the urban population by providing accessible open countryside and outdoor recreation facilities that enhance the quality of life. They will be effective in achieving those aims only if they are consistent with principles of sustainable development. Whether or not that was a guiding principle when any particular green belt was designated, it is certainly our guiding principle now.

Sustainable development means striking an appropriate balance between social, economic, environmental and natural resource considerations, and it has regard to the needs of future generations as well as the present one. Sustainability is not just about reducing car use, although some superficial commentators think that it is. The impact—positive or negative—of a development on the environment of an area must be taken into account, as must the question whether it will improve the quality of life for the wider community.

Sustainable development is about positive planning, but green belts are often used merely negatively, simply to prevent development. Some green-belt boundaries are too tight, and are then nibbled away piecemeal by departures from development plans. The Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs recognised that problem by stressing the need for the protection of the

[Mr. Raynsford]

inner boundary of the green belt to prevent urban sprawl. However, it did not say how it believed that was to be reconciled with its other recommendation that

"the great majority of . . . new homes on greenfield sites should be built as extensions to existing urban areas".

There is no doubt that there is an inherent conflict here, and that difficult conundrums must be faced and resolved. Green belts are meant to safeguard the countryside from encroachment, but new development may leapfrog the green belt, encroaching into deeper countryside and establishing travel patterns which involve more and longer journeys, putting further pressure on the environment. That is simply not sustainable planning.

PPG2 makes it clear that alteration of green belts should be contemplated only where alternatives in the urban areas contained by or beyond the green belt have been fully considered. While urban brown-field land suitable for redevelopment remains, we would not expect local authorities to release sites in the green belt.

Our policy document "Planning for the Communities of the Future" identified the possibility that the green belt might, in exceptional circumstances, offer a more sustainable location for necessary new development than sites outside the green belt. That is why we accepted, for example, the decision by Hertfordshire county council to take land to the west of Stevenage out of the green belt. That decision offered the most sustainable solution for the location of new development in the county. No one can doubt that it was a hard decision, just as no one can fail to appreciate the concerns of those who greeted it with dismay. It is clear that over-adherence to green-belt boundaries may lead to unsustainable outcomes, and, in the county council's judgment, a mass of indiscriminate development over a much larger area of rural Hertfordshire would have been unsustainable.

The Government are fully committed to the countryside. Indeed, more Labour Members than Conservative Members represent rural areas. Our concern must, however, be not just with enjoyment of the countryside for its own sake, but for those who live and work there. The Government are to produce a White Paper for rural England later this year. Rural England is changing, and we must respond to that change. The White Paper will set out the longer-term future for the English countryside and consider how policies on the economy, health, education, crime, agriculture, the environment and housing will support a sustainable countryside and rural communities in the future. It will consider how the prosperity and competitiveness of the rural economy can be strengthened, how development and regeneration policies can help areas in need, and how we can make sure that all people who live in rural areas have opportunities to participate fully in society.

The White Paper will be produced jointly by my Department and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and it will involve a wide range of other Departments and agencies. We plan to issue soon a discussion document that will set out key themes and invite comments, and we will talk to a range of interested people and organisations. We will look closely at how the urban and rural White Papers can complement each other to build a clear and comprehensive strategy for the future.

The Government have a coherent planning policy programme for urban and rural areas alike, and we are putting in place mechanisms to deliver it. Our commitment to the countryside and the green belts remains as strong as ever. The Conservative motion is a shallow, hypocritical and opportunistic ploy to divert attention away from the previous Government's abject failure to set in place clear, firm policies for sustainable development and the protection of the countryside. Their record then makes nonsense of Conservative rhetoric today, and the motion should be consigned, as they were in 1997, to the dustbin of history.

8.3 pm

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): There are good reasons for tonight's debate. At present rates of development, one fifth of England will be urban by 2050, with a green-field area the size of Bristol being built on every year. However, so far, most of what we have heard tonight has been a party political battle. It would help us to remember that the Conservative Government set the 4.4 million predict-and-provide target. Equally, the Labour Government have so far failed to get us out of it. That is why we have suggested that the Conservative motion might merely be amended to refer to the party's record as part of the problem. The Minister has more accurately represented some of the real difficulties that the Government face than did anything that we heard from the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns).

The figure of 4.4 million new homes by 2016 was the product of a Conservative Government who allowed huge green-field and out-of-town developments to take place, often after overturning local council objections. Too late, that Government recognised the problem. The Minister neglected to mention that the proportion of development on brown-field sites was rising towards the end of the Conservative Administration, but they were shutting the stable door long after the horse had bolted. Many developments, particularly out-of-town stores around the country, are all too physical evidence of that.

The Deputy Prime Minister vowed this time last year to break the mould of predict and provide. Those were fine words, but action has been slower in coming. It has certainly been slower than everyone wants, and slower than it should have been. Reports suggest that the Government are considering an increase to the original new homes figure.

In *The Guardian* on 14 January, Lord Rogers, who chairs Labour's urban task force, suggested that the 4.4 million could rise to 5 million based on new population projections that show higher-than-expected increases in the south and in East Anglia. Other newspaper reports have suggested much the same. The Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning went on record in an interview for *Country Life* in June 1998 to confirm that he—and, presumably, his Department—believes that the current estimates for required new housing are too low. He said:

"The figure of five million is entirely speculative but it will be in excess of 4.4 million."

Yet, in his statement on 23 February 1998, the Deputy Prime Minister promised to abandon predict and provide, and to protect our green fields, saying:

"It is our firm policy to protect our countryside and revitalise our towns and cities".—[*Official Report*, 23 February 1998; Vol. 307, c. 22.]

The Liberal Democrats welcomed the emphasis placed by the Deputy Prime Minister on the need for an urban renaissance for the benefit of both town and country, and

on a higher target for housing on previously developed land. We welcome the move away from predict and provide, a move for which we have long campaigned. However, the Government seem still to be confused about whether they really mean what they said.

Mr. Grieve: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with two things? First, times have changed. Over the past decade, perceptions of what is acceptable development have altered, on a European basis. Secondly, the Government have come up with the notion of sustainable development as the centre of their policy, and the figures advanced for the amount of housing required do not fall within the category of sustainable.

Mr. Taylor: It was not the Labour Government who invented the term sustainable development, but they have certainly said that they will implement the idea. I welcome that. There are questions about the figures, and I have raised my own concern. There are even bigger questions of whether policies are in place to achieve sustainable development, about where development goes and about how it evolves.

The debate on "Planning for the Communities of the Future" took place almost a year ago. So far, however, the Government's strong rhetoric has not been matched by strong action. The real failure contained in Labour's amendment to the motion is their failure to recognise that action has not been taken. As Tony Burton, assistant director of the Council for the Protection of Rural England, said in *The Times* at the end of January:

"We are living in a policy vacuum. While Prescott talks about urban renaissance and the best use of recycled land, green fields are being built on."

No new planning policy guidances have been issued. We are told that the new draft PPG on housing will be published soon, but it has not been produced yet and it has taken too long. Without scrapping existing planning guidelines and starting over, little can change. Meanwhile, applications are still dealt with on the old predict-and-provide basis and on old structure plans based on premises in place under the previous Government. Those plans will remain in place for many years to come unless the Government come up with a fast scheme to revise them.

How far have Ministers succeeded in preparing regional planning guidance that will allow local authorities to review their development plans quickly? Labour is still passing the buck. The Government claim to be decentralising planning control, but they are continuing with business as usual. In Hampshire, the Government pressed the authorities involved in the Hampshire structure plan to increase planned housing provision for 2001 to 2011 from 44,000 to 56,000, in line with regional planning guidance. That is an old decision, based on old policy.

The Deputy Prime Minister himself has forced Devon to accept house-building targets that will reduce large areas of the county to urban sprawl. Countryside near Broad Clyst, the National Trust village near Exeter, and in South Hams, between Dartmoor and the sea, will be desecrated by thousands of new homes.

The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions issued a statement on 1 April 1998 outlining the implications of the White Paper, "Planning for the Communities of the Future", for the development plans and regional planning guidance currently under review. The statement on transitional arrangements straightforwardly, and rightly, admits that the full implications of the White Paper cannot be felt until RPG and structure and local plans have been reviewed around the country. None of the good words can possibly turn into action for years to come.

Without the right planning rules and financial incentives, the good words may make little difference in the long run. There is a need to move forward. If the Government believe all that they have said about protecting the countryside, and that their new approach will make a real difference, it is time that they put in place mechanisms to allow councils to take decisions on the new basis instead of on the policies for which the Government have rightly criticised their predecessor.

The White Paper also contained a statement on green-belt land, with which it is difficult to disagree. It said:

"There might exceptionally be benefits in releasing for development indifferent Green Belt Land, if that means protecting better quality land elsewhere".

The Minister highlighted the dilemmas there, and he was right to do so.

However, the principle of green belt is that, once allocated, it provides protection on which people can rely. If new green-belt land is allocated, that is a bonus, but we are not talking about a mathematical equation. It is not all right to add land here at the expense of land developed elsewhere. The green belt is intended to provide genuine protection for the countryside around developed areas, preventing urban sprawl, not to be altered at will.

If the Government genuinely believe that much green belt was wrongly allocated in the first place, it is far better to review the matter as a whole and consider it independently, by means of a commission, an inquiry or whatever, than to take ad hoc decisions, tearing up protection and justifying that by additions elsewhere.

We have seen that happen in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, where the unitary development plan proposes the development of 2,500 executive houses and a business park on 480 hectares. Earlier, reference was made to the 2.5 square miles of green belt west of Stevenage in Hertfordshire which was released last year for 10,000 houses. The Minister is right to criticise the previous Government's record on release of green belt. Clearly, the previous Government was at least as culpable and arguably rather more so. Nevertheless, that is the biggest single release of green-belt land ever and does not appear to match up to Labour's rhetoric.

Nothing can be guaranteed altogether, and these are difficult issues, but development should be exceptional, certainly not large scale and commonplace, as it was under the previous Government and still is now.

In June 1998, the Deputy Prime Minister said that the Government's policy has added an additional 30,000 hectares of land to the United Kingdom's green belt. Adding new land to the green belt is easy. Any Minister can do that simply with a stroke of a pen. It is resisting its future development that is the issue, and, on that, the Government are failing in their own terms.

Green-field and green-belt sites are still being developed as before, local councils are still being encouraged to build more homes than they think

[Mr. Taylor]

they need, and Labour is still umming and ahhing about whether the figure of 4.4 million new homes stays, increases or is dropped altogether.

The Liberal Democrats believe that there is a straightforward package of measures that the Government should adopt to stop unnecessary development in the countryside and revitalise our towns and cities. The two go hand in hand and the Minister was right to say so.

The revision of PPG3 could and should have been completed earlier. That would have provided a clear sign in national planning guidance of the change in approach, and would have immediate effect by now. The Government are in favour of that change, and that is welcome, but it is still unpublished, even in draft, and the final version is probably 12 months away.

We advocated a stop to controversial major new development plans and approvals until the new PPG3 is published. That would ensure that the Government's plan, monitor and manage strategy became a reality within months, not years, but it has not happened.

In the White Paper "Planning for the Communities of the Future", the proposed new regional planning system leaves the DETR to produce the projections and the regional planning conferences to produce the guidance, but the Secretary of State has the final say as to whether the figures are acceptable. We are not really moving from predict and provide; the Government are simply disguising their own role. That allows the Government to pass the buck under the guise of regional decision making, but to have the final say if they do not agree with the plans—a factor that will rest heavily on the shoulders of those given that responsibility at regional level.

In the same document, the Government aim to raise the proportion of new homes built on previously developed land from 50 to 60 per cent., but state that a national target may not be meaningful at regional or local levels. Perhaps so, but how will the Government co-ordinate the regional targets in order to ensure that they all add up to the desired 60 per cent. nationally, or is it a target for which the Government will not accept responsibility, arguing that, unfortunately, decisions were taken at a local level that they did not want, but they did not intervene because they were decentralist?

Changing planning policy is part of the way to achieve that, but we need to recognise that financial and social pressures are also involved. The Minister asked for the Liberal Democrats' suggestions. I agree with what the Government are arguing for, but I am pointing out that they have not done it and, until they do so, they cannot deliver. Changing planning policy is only part of the solution, and I want to deal with a couple of fundamental points before I finish. At the moment, it is far cheaper and less risky, and so more profitable, to develop green-field sites.

That financial imperative is probably as big as any planning ones. Developers will repeatedly put in applications until local opposition is worn away, in the hope that they will eventually make the profits. The profits are big enough to allow them to do so. Therefore, we need to introduce a levy on the windfall profits made on green-field development, levelling the financial playing field between development on green-field and brown-field sites. That would reduce the financial advantages of developing green-field sites, and raise funds that should be earmarked for local environmental improvements and the decontamination of brown-field sites, helping with the costs of developing them.

Mr. Gray: Liberal Democrats are always on about levies on green-field sites for green-field development. Does he agree that, if such a measure were in place, all that would happen would be that those houses which are built on green-field sites would be more expensive—larger, middle-class, executive-style homes? Developers would not care in the least about a green-field levy. It would be an incentive to build on the green-field sites that the hon. Gentleman seeks to protect.

Mr. Taylor: I do not see that the fact that it would be more expensive for a developer would be an incentive to build on those sites. Those funds would be used to reduce the costs of building on brown-field sites, equalling out the playing field that is currently weighted towards the green-field sites.

In addition, building on green-field sites is positively encouraged at present, and re-development discouraged, because no value added tax is charged on new development, whereas the refurbishment of empty homes and offices carries the full rate. That urgently needs changing. Re-balancing VAT to provide an equal VAT cost on re-development of derelict buildings and green fields, bringing one down and putting the other up, at no net cost to the Exchequer, could dramatically change the financial picture, yet there are no new economic instruments from the Government. I am glad to say that Lord Rogers urban task force has, in its interim report, recommended them.

I hope that the Chancellor of the Exchequer will come forward with proposals in the Budget. I am sorry if I sound a little negative, but, so far, the Chancellor has been extremely slow in coming forward with any environmentally friendly and sustainable changes to taxation policy. In fact, recently, he won a grey ribbon award for his bad record on the environment, so I am not optimistic. If they do come, we will welcome them, and they will help to achieve the 60 per cent. target—which is unrealistic without them—and move us towards the 75 per cent. target that the Government round table on sustainable development, and the Lord Rogers task force, suggested.

We must also address the fact that many people want to leave urban areas because the policy in cities and towns is going wrong. Tackling the problems of a derelict environment, high crime levels and poor schools is fundamental if we are to persuade people to stay in our cities. We should bear in mind that Britain is unusual in seeing large numbers move out of the inner urban areas. In much of the rest of Europe, cities are popular places in which to live because of planning and the lack of dereliction.

I should have liked to have mentioned the problem of second homes, but I have run out of time. I would say to the Minister: get rid of the council tax discount; look at introducing planning controls, which already exist for offices and should exist for the conversion of family homes into second and holiday homes and, finally, look at the 800,000 empty properties in Britain before planning to build unnecessarily on green-field sites.

8.19 pm

Mr. Keith Vaz (Leicester, East): The hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) demonstrates what the Liberal Democrats are so good at—facing in two directions at the same time, supporting the country and the town—but his saving grace is that he does it always with a smile.

I welcome the debate. It is a pity that it has been such a long time since the Conservative party last initiated a debate on planning. I cannot remember, when the Labour party was in opposition and the Conservative party was in government, a passionate devotion to planning in the green belt, but I am glad that we are having the debate. This is the 12th planning debate—Adjournment and otherwise—that I have attended. Under the previous Government, it was usually through an Adjournment procedure that we got to discuss planning.

I am delighted that we have at the Dispatch Box two Ministers who have a grip on the subject, who understand the problems of the planning system and who are so passionately committed to the green belt. I welcome the work that they have done over the past 18 months, and I know that they will continue to produce thoughtful and appropriate policies that will meet the needs of local communities.

I am not surprised that the former Secretary of State for the Environment, the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), has run away. He came to make a little statement and then left. That is what he did to the planning system and the green belt—he made a few statements, did a few photo calls and then abandoned the system. This was the man who introduced PPG6 and PPG13 during his term in office, two policies that also faced in different directions at the same time. They were criticised by the present vice-chairman of the Conservative party, the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman), in his capacity as the chairman of Asda. I do not know what he is going to say tonight, but I hope that he will repeat some of the criticisms that he had when the Conservative party were in government.

Of course Labour is passionately committed to the green belt and the countryside. It is a very strong commitment, which is why so many Labour Members are present to speak in the debate. The previous Government neglected the green belt and ignored any ideas that could have supported it or our cities.

It is sheer hypocrisy for the shadow spokesman to condemn this Government for what they have done. The Minister was quite right to read out a list of crimes committed by the previous Government against the green belt. It is a list of which the Conservative party should be ashamed. It is hypocritical for Conservatives to pretend that they support the green belt. We know that they have to pretend because most of them are now in marginal seats, and the Liberal Democrats are close to capturing many of those seats. We understand why they say those things—no doubt their local newspapers are also covering the debate—but we have an absolute commitment, reasserted by the Minister, by which we will stand.

I have only a few minutes in which to speak because I know that many colleagues want to contribute to the debate, but I must mention the importance of modernising our planning system and perhaps put a couple of points to the Minister so that he is aware that we support what he has done in respect of planning, but hope that he will take the modernisation procedures forward.

It is important that we examine all the PPGs that have been issued so far. One of the criticisms that I have of the planning system is that there is no firm body of planning law. Those who advise councils and others when applications are made have no consistency. I do not agree with the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell, who said that the Government should be criticised for not publishing more PPGs. We have had too many PPGs, and the process needs to be streamlined. We need to examine those that have been passed so far and see whether they are consistent. A number of those issued under the previous Government were not, which is why we have the problems that we have.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman. I think that he missed my point. We need to update PPGs, not add to their number.

Mr. Vaz: If that is what the hon. Gentleman said, I apologise. He is absolutely right. We need to update our PPGs, and that is why I have previously suggested the creation of an advisory committee to advise Ministers and the Government on the inconsistencies in our planning system, especially the PPGs, so that, before they are issued, they can be made consistent with the planning law that goes before them.

The only people who seem to be able to understand the complicated nature of planning law are the planning silks, and we all know how well they do out of the planning system. Why should it be that the only people who benefit from the planning system are the lawyers? I say that as a former lawyer, although not a planning lawyer. The fact that the system is complicated makes matters much worse.

There needs to be consistency and firmness in the system but also flexibility. It is important that developers also know what the present planning system is. Part of the work that the Government have done has been to convince big developers such as the retailers of the importance of developing within city centres. Some of the big supermarkets such as Asda, Tesco, Sainsbury and Safeway understand that, when we say that they have to pass a sequential test, we mean it. We are not going to do what the Conservative Secretary of State did, which was to say that he supported a sequential test but then not follow through. Those developers are told that they ought to develop within city centres and within existing communities. To be fair to them, many have come up with innovative schemes to ensure that there is development within city centres.

When I go home at night, I pass the development on the Finchley road, which has been led by Sainsbury. It has been beneficial because it has brought businesses into the local community, and it is a pleasure to shop in areas of that kind. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) has left the Chamber, but what Boots has done for the centre of Harrow encourages people to come there. That means that we do not have to have development outside.

We want people to move into our city and town centres, not to move out of them. I see that the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry), a former Environment Minister, is sitting on the Front Bench. Under the previous Government's policy, it was sad that our town centres were abandoned rather than celebrated. We need investment in our town and city centres so that they are safe places in which to live and work.

[Mr. Vaz]

Anyone passing Marble Arch and the Edgware road late at night will see exactly the kind of vibrant, inner-city area that we want to see developed. The shops are open quite late into the night; people walk around quite safely; and, although not all the cafes are open in January, the area has the atmosphere of which continental cities are so proud.

Delay is still inherent in the planning system. I know that it was inherited—*[Interruption.]* It is no good the shadow Minister nodding; it was under the Conservative Government that the backlog developed. Their failure to appoint inspectors and to get planning inquiries moving caused the backlog and delay. We need more inspectors and a more efficient planning inspectorate so that, when applications are turned down, there can be a much quicker resolution of the problem.

I do not know whether any of the Conservative Members present speaks for Hampshire, but, in Mitchell Deva, a community has been under threat for the past five or six years because no one will make a decision as to whether houses can be built in the local area. That causes enormous distress and concern to local people, so let us try to get rid of the delays inherent in the system.

Secondly, the planning system is still very costly, and the only people who can use it are the developers who have a great deal of money. We need to bring the cost down. Some inquiries, such as that into the fifth terminal at Heathrow, go on for years. Despite the enormous cost of the T5 inquiry, we all know what is going to happen in the end. Clearly, local people need to be able to put their case. Perhaps they could be funded through the planning system so that they can get the kind of barristers that some of the big developers use, but let us see an end to those large and long-winded public inquiries.

I welcome the planning role for the regional development agencies. The Minister is right—the regional conferences will enable many of the problems to be dealt with at the regional and local level. That is the way to operate. Instead of having Whitehall dictate what should happen in our regions, local people should work together.

Finally, I commend the work of the urban task force. The Government were right to put someone as eminent as Lord Rogers into the chair of the urban task force. He is one of the foremost architects of this century. He is committed to ensuring that we celebrate our towns and cities. The task force is going to our major towns and cities to take evidence and to listen to the good practice of local Labour councils. That is because all Labour councils have done good work. That having been done, the task force will produce a report that will enable us to have a good urban policy—that is something that we should support.

I look forward to receiving the task force's report because the key to protecting our green belt is to ensure that development occurs on brown-field sites in the cities. It is no longer a question of the bankrupt contest between town and city. The way to resolve these problems is to ensure that we examine ways in which our urban renaissance can be developed so that there will not be development outside urban areas. That is the best way to plan for prosperity and to plan for our people.

8.31 pm

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): I am grateful to be able to speak tonight solely about West Sussex and to invite the Minister, after what I thought was a deplorable performance from the Government Dispatch Box on such a serious matter, to deal sensibly and seriously with the points that I shall make. I shall speak in the context of the motion tabled by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition and other right hon. and hon. Friends. I shall focus my remarks on the grave anxieties that are rightly and understandably felt by those who live in my constituency of Mid-Sussex and in West Sussex more generally.

As the Minister may or may not know, West Sussex has some of the most beautiful and romantic landscape in Britain. However, under present Government policy, not one green field is safe in the area. Every settlement feels that it is under pressure. In East Grinstead, Haywards Heath and Burgess Hill, local people are extremely anxious about the Government's monstrous decisions. This is a wholly unacceptable and thoroughly bad state of affairs. It happens also to be environmentally unsustainable.

I shall remind the House of exactly what has happened in West Sussex. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns), who so carefully and sensibly set out the case.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Soames: No, I will not.

There is no disagreement in West Sussex, as the Minister knows, that there will have to be development. Mid-Sussex is at the heart of a prosperous, growing and ambitious county. All parties in West Sussex agreed on a structure plan, which was approved by one of Her Majesty's inspectors at an examination in public in May 1997. It was a well-researched, well-documented and careful piece of work by the county, the district and the parish councils. It related to the overall environmental and economic situation in West Sussex.

The Deputy Prime Minister, in what was a monstrous decision, overturned his inspector's report in December 1997. The right hon. Gentleman has imposed, in addition to the 37,800 houses which the county council had agreed to build, 13,000 houses on the county.

Mr. Blizzard: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Soames: No, I will not give way.

The Deputy Prime Minister has ordered West Sussex to ignore his inspector's assessment, and by central Government bully-boy tactics, he has chosen to exceed the environmentally safe capacity of West Sussex. The truth is—the Government have deliberately ignored it—that the infrastructure in Mid-Sussex especially, and in West Sussex more widely, cannot cope with such a level of development.

The new houses will put impossible pressure on schools and social services that are already hard pressed. This will follow on from West Sussex having suffered an appalling local government settlement this year. Equally, there will be impossible pressure on hospitals and roads. Already in

Mid-Sussex I have almost every week a request to visit schools and other facilities where life is made impossible by the burden of traffic and the growth of it around schools, for example, where there are seriously dangerous situations developing.

Central government—even the previous Conservative Government—have not put enough money into roads in West Sussex. The present Government have not only failed to put enough money into roads, they have cut the programme altogether. That flies in the face of other Government policies. I shall quote an answer that was given to me by the Economic Secretary to the Treasury. My question was to be answered on 25 January but the hon. Lady was unable to provide an answer on that day for reasons that I understand. She had to have three extra days to answer it. I asked the Chancellor of the Exchequer

"what steps he has taken to encourage an environmentally sustainable economy in Britain."

The Economic Secretary replied:

"The Government's approach to sustainable development is based on four broad objectives",

the fourth of which was the

"effective protection of the environment and prudent use of natural resources."—[*Official Report*, 28 January 1999; Vol. 324, c. *349-50*.]

If the Minister thinks that the Government are providing effective protection of natural resources and the environment in West Sussex, he is gravely mistaken.

Within the context of the motion, I shall say a word or two about the green belt and its impact. This was the only part of the Minister's speech in which he said something of interest. Much of Surrey and other home counties is designated as metropolitan green belt. The effect of this is to restrict the outward growth of London and to constrain severely the expansion of many of the settlements within the green belt—for example Redhill and Dorking.

Protecting the green belt can and has pushed development pressures into other areas, especially those just beyond the green belt—for example, the northern part of West Sussex where my seat is located, and, among others, Horsham, Crawley and Mid-Sussex. Green fields in those areas, without the protection of green-belt status, accordingly and inevitably come under greater threat from development. The Government are reluctant to extend green belts beyond those areas already designated.

In West Sussex the structure plan policy—that of the structure plan that has not been overturned by the Deputy Prime Minister—aims to protect strongly and forcefully the remaining strategic gaps that are crucial between settlements—for example between Crawley and East Grinstead, Crawley and Horsham and Haywards Heath and Burgess Hill. At present, the Government do not think that such local designations—strategic gaps—should protect land as strongly as national designation such as the green belt and areas of outstanding natural beauty.

I urge the Government to take seriously the request to enable greater protection to be afforded for counties such as West Sussex in the situation that I have described, and to enable greater protection by placing on a par with green belts strategic gaps and other similar local designations. That is vital if the Government are serious about trying to protect the character of areas where pressure for development is at its strongest.

Paragraph 236 of the excellent report of the Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs states:

"Environmental protection and sustainable development should be put at the centre of policies on the location of housing."

To my intense sadness and regret, the Government have not done that. No doubt, the previous Government were also seriously at fault. As the Minister rightly said, planning is an extremely difficult matter. However, in terms of the protection of the countryside, West Sussex has suffered what amounts to environmental vandalism. I want the Government to reconsider the consequences of their actions because their steps are, and will continue to be, hugely damaging to the environment.

If the Government persist with what amounts to a gross betrayal of the West Sussex countryside, we must ensure that more is done to improve the design and layout of new developments. I very much agree with one or two points made by the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) about the reform of the planning system. I want much tighter designation of architecture, design and layout.

I am delighted that, in June last year, members of the Select Committee visited the Duchy of Cornwall's remarkably interesting project at Poundbury in Dorset. They also visited the millennium village in the Minister's constituency, which is another fine example of new ideas. I hope that the Government will pay attention to the lessons of Poundbury. West Sussex county council officials paid a visit there in November and came away very impressed, as I had been on an earlier trip.

No one is suggesting that all new developments should look like Poundbury—of course they should not—but we need to take on board that what was dismissed as an irrelevance by the know-all practitioners has now been accepted as best practice in the layout and design of new settlements. We must learn that the requirements of environmental quality, layout, architecture and harmony must be much more strictly fulfilled if we are to accept the horrific level of planning that is suggested. Best practice should include thoughtful and sensible principles on planning and architecture. Poundbury has achieved a remarkable success and I hope that the Government and planners will be much tougher on builders about those principles.

I urge the Government to reconsider their actions in West Sussex. Of course there has to be development, but the Deputy Prime Minister's decision to overturn the inspector's report was monstrous and has led to great unhappiness and concern in my constituency.

8.41 pm

Mr. Colin Pickthall (West Lancashire): Almost all of my constituency is in the green belt, and that has prevented Greater Manchester from physically merging with Merseyside. That fact alone is sufficient to make me daily bless the vision of those in the post-war Labour Government who made the green belt a reality.

In speaking about my green belt, I speak also about the green belt covered by the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Mr. Borrow), which shares the same characteristics and problems. This will be an "on the one hand, but on the other" contribution to the debate because I believe that neither a totally defensive nor a totally invasive policy on the green belt is acceptable.

[Mr. Colin Pickthall]

First, it is important to point out that the green belt is not homogenous. It varies in its geological and agricultural characteristics and very much so in its proximity to, or remoteness from, urban settlements. In my part of the world, the green belt is mostly flat peat land and reclaimed marsh. It is mostly A1 agricultural land and most of the industry is horticulture and the production of field vegetables of an extremely high quality.

Despite the variety in green-belt characteristics across the country and the different levels of pressures on the green belt in, for example, the south-east around Greater London compared with Lancashire, the underlying purpose of that land is the same. As PPG2 says, that purpose is

"to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built up areas and to prevent towns merging; to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment; to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns and to assist in urban regeneration by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land."

It is worth reminding ourselves of those objectives, as it is worth reminding ourselves of the first sentence under "Designation" in PPG2, which says:

"The essential characteristic of Green Belts is their permanence."

Within the parameters of what development is allowed in the green belt, land usage is a different matter, and I shall return to that point in a moment.

I want to place on record my deep appreciation for the stout defence of the principles and objectives of the green belt put up by West Lancashire district council and, in particular, the stubborn resistance of the chairman of planning, Bob Pendleton, to the despoliation of the green belt. However, those like myself who have had the good luck to live and work surrounded by the green belt—in my case, for over 30 years—are badly placed to object in principle to the natural desire of those in Liverpool and Manchester to move into the areas that we so much enjoy.

One of the things that worries me about Opposition Members' total concentration on housing and planning in the green belt—I understand their anxieties—is that behind it lies the substratum opinion, "We have got into the green belt, thank you very much; we are all right. Pull up the drawbridge. We do not want anybody else in here with us if we can possibly help it."

My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has very properly and crucially yoked, by violence, the preservation of the green belt and green areas generally with the need to upgrade and improve our urban environment. I urge the Government to pursue that relationship relentlessly, and I am sure that they will.

There is more capacity for developing brown-field sites and for living above shops; there are more redundant Ministry of Defence and Department of the Environment, Transport and Regions sites, as well old hospital and old asylum sites to be developed; there is a vast amount of unused Railtrack land. Planning and taxation obstacles to such development possibilities can be adjusted to speed up such acceptable development, while as much development of the green belt as possible is slowed down. My right hon. Friend has proposed a target of 60 per cent.—that has been much debated, so I need not go into it. I believe that that can be achieved, and improved on.

I said at the outset that there are huge differences in land characteristics and usage between green belts. I want to flag up some of the problems faced by my constituents. The survival of economic activity in the rural areas of West Lancashire depends on an intricate and delicate web of interdependence in the horticultural and field vegetable industries. In order to challenge, or to integrate with, the power of major retailers, which I am glad to see are represented in the Chamber, growers must adapt their buildings and become more efficient in transporting their produce. Farmers must adapt their buildings to meet animal welfare needs, among other pressures. Restrictions in green-belt regulations make that process exceedingly difficult and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) said, extremely protracted. It is absurd that local growers and hauliers are often unable simply to park their vehicles on or close to their land because hard-standing counts as building development. Several small growers in my constituency have closed down precisely because of that.

Changing buildings directly to meet the demands of supermarket buyers can also prove so protracted and difficult that contracts are lost. Many local authorities, particularly mine, have been stung by the fiddling of planning permission for so-called agricultural dwellings to the point that they are reluctant to grant any such permission. Absurdly, that has led to them making judgments on the commercial viability of projects—something that local councils are not fitted to do. Constituents of mine are trying to diversify from pig farming—who would not if they had the choice—by buying a redundant plant nursery and bringing it back to life. That nursery is in the green belt and has no dwelling attached to it. The project could well fall through due to obstacles to planning permission in such circumstances.

On the other hand, some of the activities allowed in the green belt are proving to be a different problem. Sprawling golf courses, for which permission is granted because they are part of what is considered acceptable use, sports centres and a proposed crematorium and graveyard in West Lancashire are all as bad an intrusion into agricultural green belt as small factories or extended horticultural units, and certainly as bad as housing development. A proposal to convert a redundant commercial unit in a tiny hamlet into a smithy was turned down because it was deemed not to be agriculture related.

Most problems with residential caravan sites, the creation of new farm roads and alternative use of redundant farm buildings will be common to all green belts, but problems that might be especially acute in horticultural areas require particularly sensitive handling, which is not always enhanced by green-belt regulation. That handling is of course best understood and undertaken locally. I am enthusiastic about the role to be played in this process by regional development agencies. I do not share the fears and cynicism of the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns). I very much hope to see elected regional government in the next Parliament which has an overview of such matters.

I am aware that there is a contradiction in what I have said. I have learnt to contradict myself very quickly; it saves my wife the trouble. I have argued the defensive case, which would be strongly in support of the integrity of the green belt, and, at the same time, I am arguing for

more local flexibility—not in terms of the extent of the green belt, but the land usage within it and permissions for that.

Local authorities are much more likely to be able to judge the genuineness of the need or the demand for development, especially in relation to local commercial need as well as housing. Specifically, local authorities are most likely to be able to make sensible judgments about infill in "washed over" villages and hamlets. Remarkably, in Lancashire, surveys of parish need for new homes often produce the information that there is no need, but that never prevents the owners of a large garden or spare plot from conjuring up amazing arguments to prove the need for, or the reasonableness of, what they are doing. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East said, it is the people with the money who can command the planning silks, who always seem to get their way in the end.

How do we square the contradictory pressures that all hon. Members who represent green-belt areas experience? Whatever else it did not do, the Opposition's chronic over-egging of the case for preservation of the green belt in recent months, which might well have buried the case for its conservation, has brought into the public domain the Government's more detailed ideas about green-belt policy and countryside policy as a whole. Many of us have returned to the Labour party policy document produced before the general election, "A Working Countryside", for which my right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh (Dr. Strang) has not had sufficient credit.

For my constituency's green belt, the devil is always in the detail. Given the natural reluctance of a council to get embroiled in lengthy and expensive appeals and wrangling with landowners' barristers, it is easier for the council to say no, full stop. In many cases planning applications are passed to and fro between district and county councils.

Some time ago, I suggested to my local council that one way forward might be to self-impose an absolute limit on the amount of green belt that it would allow even to be considered for suitable development. I envisaged a tiny proportion, perhaps 0.1 per cent., but that would still representing a significant amount of possibilities. That would allow the identification of relatively degraded land, and of unsightly, unused farm buildings, as well as the identification of key small sites for the parking of produce merchants' vehicles, for the erection of small appropriate commercial units and so on.

As things stand, the pressures on industrial and commercial land in Skelmersdale—a new town well inside the green belt—are now such that, this year, the council is planning to release a large tract of land on the edge of the town, formerly designated to come into the planning ambit in six years' time. A more flexible overall policy might have enabled us to avoid that. Although it is good that Skelmersdale is at last starting to grow after years of being trodden on by the previous Government, it is regrettable that it can do so only by spreading into attractive open countryside in what is still the green belt, with the development of an industrial estate.

I am pleased that my right hon. Friends the Ministers are taking green-belt issues seriously and responding to the concerns that my hon. Friends have been expressing for a considerable time. I look forward to the work of the new RDA for the north-west. I and my north-west colleagues have already had fruitful and encouraging contacts on those issues with Lord Thomas of Macclesfield, the chairman designate.

I commend to my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary the massive amount of work done by my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mr. Bradley) in the countryside, and the work done by the Back-Bench rural affairs group, which I trust will inform the debate on the forthcoming rural White Paper. It would be a pity if the Government started re-inventing a wheel that we have already done a good amount of work to fashion.

8.54 pm

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): It is an honour to be called to speak in the debate, not least because I was privileged to serve on the Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, whose 10th report on housing has been so much discussed and praised this evening. It is also an honour to serve behind the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), who regrettably is not in her place but whose robust views on the subject were clearly laid out in the report, and whose robust views on most subjects go to great lengths to embarrass her own Government. I am always proud to serve behind her, and I am sure that she will be pleased to hear that.

I should tell the Minister for London and Construction that it was not I who described him in that disgraceful way in the Select Committee report. As I was the only Conservative Member serving on the Committee at that time, he must deduce that it was someone from his own side who came to that disgraceful conclusion. On that person's behalf, I apologise for it, although, if one listened to the Minister's speech this evening, one might gain some insight into why that conclusion was reached.

I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Mr. Pickthall). I shall have a little to say about the north-west and the north-east of England later in my brief remarks. I know that several hon. Members want to take part in the debate, so I shall try to restrict myself to one specific point about my constituency and two or three general points.

With regard to my constituency, North Wiltshire is threatened by the ever-westward expansion of Swindon. For example, it has recently been decided that 5,000 houses are likely to be built in what is known as the front garden of Swindon, which is in the constituency of the hon. Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown): If that is allowed, it will be a touchstone of the Government's attitude to building. There will be an inexorable growth towards my villages of Lydiard Millicent, Purton and Wootton Bassett, which are terrified that Swindon will encroach upon them and engulf them.

The Secretary of State will no doubt read the report of this debate tomorrow. His attitude the growth of Swindon will be taken as a touchstone in our view of the entire matter when the Opposition—I fear that it will be the Opposition who call it—call the next debate, which will be the fourth that we have called on the subject since we came into opposition.

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): I hope that the hon. Gentleman will offer some constructive comments about how we can move forward. Does he agree that one

[Ms Julia Drown]

possible way forward is to examine the density of housing that we should build on brown-field land, and to regenerate our towns, as the Government have outlined?

Mr. Gray: I agree with the hon. Lady. I know that, around Swindon, there are many brown-field sites. I hope that the Secretary of State's strengthening of the rural buffer zone that protects my constituency from Swindon may force developers into the centre of Swindon to develop precisely the kind of sites that the hon. Lady describes.

On a more general point, the Secretary of State seems to be like a rabbit. It may be hard to imagine him as a rabbit, frozen in the headlights of an on-coming Land Rover driven by the developers, but his inaction over the past 12 months suggests that. He simply does not know what to do about the 4.4 million households that we are told that the nation will need between now and 2016. I believe that the latest projections from civil servants may be as high as 5 million households, rather than 4.4 million, as we had all hoped.

As I speak from the Back Benches, and therefore speak with no authority of my party or anyone else, I shall suggest a few ideas to the Secretary of State for dealing with the problem of all those households.

Politicians of all parties go to great lengths to say how much they support the family, how strongly we believe in the family and how we must keep families together, although, in party political debates, we often argue that the Labour party seems less committed to families than we are. None the less, most politicians of most parties go to great lengths to support the nuclear family, and argue that, through taxation and other measures, we must keep the family together.

However, the vast bulk of those 4.4 million households are not nuclear families. We need more and more houses, not because the population is expanding, not because we are all having babies, but because more and more families are breaking up. Most of the 4.4 million homes needed will be for single-parent families. I hold nothing against single-parent families. Nevertheless, it is true that we are talking, not about a growth in the population, but about significant social changes in that population.

Perhaps the nation might like to consider the proposition that, if we restricted the availability of housing, that might encourage more families to stay together, or more youngsters to stay at home for a longer time, or more families to look after the elderly after they have finished living in their own houses.

Barbara Follett: Is it not true that the growth in the number of households is caused by longevity? More people are living longer and they are living alone.

Mr. Gray: That is true; longevity is one of many reasons. However, the growth in the number of single-parent families is a key factor—divorce is causing a rise in the number of households. Even if the hon. Lady is right, my point is that, in the old days, families tended to keep their old folk with them. Allowing an ever-aging population to live alone in large houses is not necessarily the best way of using our diminishing housing stock. We should not build on green-field sites in order to leave old ladies in the family home where they have always lived—although I respect the fact that they may wish to continue to live there.

The second fundamental issue involves a self-fulfilling prophecy. In areas such as North Wiltshire or Swindon, successful businesses create employment and attract many people to the locality. The businesses then expand—for example, Honda recently announced the creation of an extra 5,000 jobs in Swindon—and someone says, "Gosh, look at all those jobs; we must have more houses to accommodate the employees". Consequently, more businesses locate to the area.

In the meantime, there are 800,000 empty houses in Britain. Some 100,000 of them are in the public sector—they are the responsibility of local authorities, housing associations and other public sector bodies. We are not using 100,000 public sector houses. If asked why that is so, most people would say that it is because the houses are not in the right places. That is correct: those empty houses are not in Swindon. The people who fill the 5,000 jobs with Honda will not live in any of those 800,000 houses because we have no empties in North Wiltshire. I think I am correct in saying—the hon. Member for South Swindon will correct me if I am not—that there are few empties in Swindon. Those empty houses are in the north-east and the north-west—as the hon. Member for West Lancashire pointed out.

Mr. Drew: The hon. Gentleman is talking about the need for an effective regional policy. When he was adviser to the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), what suggestions did he make with regard to such a policy?

Mr. Gray: The hon. Gentleman may dress it up as effective regional policy, but my point has nothing to do with a top-down regional policy or RDAs saying, "Here is what you guys down there must do." I am talking about restricting the availability of housing in areas such as mine. That will force businesses to locate in the north-east and the north-west of England and people will go to live in those areas and occupy the empty houses. That is a straightforward market-driven approach to solving the problem—it has nothing to do with RDAs, regional policies and all of those things that the Labour party loves.

It is an economic self-fulfilling prophecy that, because the south-west and south-east of England are prosperous, they must be allowed to become even more prosperous and we must allow more and more people to live in those areas. We tell ourselves that, as a nation, we have a duty to provide houses for people where they want them and at prices that they can afford. I suggest that, if we chose to restrict the availability of housing in the south-east and the south-west—as well as in other popular areas—businesses would perhaps locate to where housing is available; where there are empties and brown-field sites.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): In Cambridge, an over-provision of jobs and an under-provision of homes leads to the development of unsustainable policies. People live outside my constituency and drive to work because public transport is poor. That causes huge traffic congestion and air pollution in the city, and that is much less attractive than having more homes that we need in the city.

Mr. Gray: The hon. Lady is absolutely right: that is a very good point. It reminds me that the Minister failed to

answer the question posed by my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) about development around Cambridge. Perhaps the Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning might like to address that issue in his winding-up speech.

Ms Drown *rose—*

Mr. Gray: I am concerned that, if I take many more interventions, I may overstay my welcome.

My third general point was also touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames). We take a curious approach to town planning in this nation. We presume that everyone wants to live on the outskirts of town—the outskirts of Cambridge, for example, as the hon. Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell) has suggested—and in cul-de-sacs, which, for some reason we all love. We also presume that everyone wants to live in two or three-bedroom semi-detached houses with two bathrooms and preferably two garages, but a large number of those 4.4 million households are single-parent families that might well prefer to live in the centre of town and in more densely populated areas, for example in the centre of Swindon, near the railway station, buses and shops.

The presumption that we all want to live in suburban England, down a cul-de-sac, has been challenged most noticeably—as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex correctly said—by His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales in his ground-breaking development in Poundbury, which the Select Committee so much enjoyed visiting. That is a truly sustainable development: he has shops, houses and factories, all within walking distance of each other.

That is what town planning ought to be about. It should not necessarily be about huge, useless cul-de-sacs where people need a car to get to the shops, to school or to work. Poundbury gives us some messages and the report goes some length towards saying that we ought to consider carefully some of the lessons to be learned from it.

I hope that it does not take another 12 months for the Secretary of State to make some useful moves forward. As in so many other policy areas, he keeps telling us what he will do, he keeps setting up new bodies and he appoints yet another noble Lord to write a report about something, perhaps a working party or a committee.

I very much hope that it does not take the right hon. Gentleman another 12 months to drop some of that useless rhetoric and start living up to what he has been saying all this time. He should start helping out the people of Devon and the people of Swindon, who are so threatened, as well as the people in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex and the people of Stevenage. All those people are so threatened by the development that the Secretary of State is allowing to happen.

I call on the Secretary of State to drop the empty rhetoric, drop the committees and drop the working parties and get stuck into turning down some of these disgraceful applications.

9.7 pm

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): I am pleased that the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) is keen on the dispersal of industrial development and prosperity from the wealthier areas to the less prosperous parts of the country, such as my constituency, but I am not convinced that his methods would necessarily work.

At the end of his speech, the hon. Gentleman spoke about rhetoric. The rhetoric that we heard at the beginning of the debate only confirmed my belief that what happened after May 1997 was that the Conservatives woke up. When they had surveyed the wreckage, they realised that virtually all that they had left were their shire heartlands. They thought that they would work on the principle of consolidating what they had and therefore tried to present their party as the party of rural England, and they could only say England.

The Conservatives neglected to notice that there are 175 rural and semi-rural Labour Members of Parliament, which is more than the number of Conservative Members. Since May 1997, our Government have been presented in a series of attacks as the destroyers of the green belt and the despoilers of the countryside. The Conservatives have thrown in a bit about beef on the bone and a bit about fox hunting and have tried to present that as the end of rural life as we know it. That has left the ordinary people who live in the rural areas very cold. Nearly two years on, we can see that those attacks are completely without foundation and that there is no truth in what they allege about the Government.

Those attacks seem to be based on the proposition that the green belt has to be some absolute and that the best way to protect the countryside is to freeze it in time: "Thou shalt not ever build in the countryside." Thus, a hollow argument that is no use at all to those involved in the serious business of trying to plan at local level has developed. I want to show how that highly simplistic approach is pointless and not in the best interests of the countryside and rural people.

I share what I am sure is the view of most hon. Members who are in the Chamber—that it is important to protect the countryside and green belt—but I want to show that real situations are far more complicated than the Opposition have described, by presenting a few examples from my constituency. We all want a sustainable countryside. To achieve that, we must sustain village life. People in my constituency who have lived in villages all their lives tell me that they want some homes in their villages so that their grown-up children can remain there instead of having to move away. There must be some scope for well-thought-out growth in villages to accommodate those people.

Everyone wants to keep village schools, which tie rural communities together. If young people have to move out of villages to towns to find somewhere to live, there will be no children to fill the village schools and they will have to close. It is the same with shops and other services.

Village life needs transport, and the Government are giving many villages a lifeline for the first time. The county of Suffolk, which contains my constituency, has had well over £1 million, and many villages have a bus service for the first time.

If we want a sustainable countryside, we must sustain farming as an industry. Our farmers are challenged by world movements, reform of the common agricultural policy and many other changes. We agree that farmers will have to diversify into other commercial activities, but to do so they may need planning permission, and all too often planning applications are given a blanket refusal. Farmers and country landowners have told me that they want flexibility in the planning system to enable them to continue farming and to operate commercially in the countryside.

[Mr. Bob Blizzard]

We also need to sustain a rural economy and ensure that there is work in the countryside for the people who live there, so that they do not all pile into the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell). A classic example in my constituency a few years ago was a proposal to turn an old country hall into a brewery. Thankfully, St. Peter's brewery is now a successful, small company—people may have seen its beer in the supermarkets. It had a tremendous planning battle. It was thought that there would be noise, disturbance, smell and light, but in fact it is a good example of a rural enterprise. We need to encourage such ventures, and not require people to overcome so many obstacles.

My constituency is a mixture of urban and rural areas, so we must think of the quality of life in our towns and not just in the countryside. Even with a bottom-up approach, as favoured by the Government, and with brown-field development taking priority, there will have to be some expansion. If we allocate only the minimum amount of land, we get the cramped estates of the past that offer poor living conditions without facilities for the people who live in them. They have only the obligatory little rectangle of grass with a swing in the corner to satisfy planning conditions.

In the recent round of allocations in the local plan, my authority decided that it wanted quality. We allocated more land than was necessary, so the developer was able to acquire and hand over to the public new, large parks and new playing fields. With a little imagination in the planning process, green space is protected for the people.

Government policy on playing fields and open spaces is very strong. Only a few weeks ago, new guidance was issued ensuring that all applications to convert an open space or playing field have to be called in. I know how strict that policy is, because in Bungay in my constituency, the community wants part of a site for a doctor's surgery to serve a vital need. The site is not used as a playing field. People would have liked that planning decision to be made locally, but there has had to be an inquiry. I give that example to show the Government's commitment to protecting open space, and to make a plea for flexibility when doctors' surgeries are at stake.

Some developments are essential, but it is rather unpleasant to live next door to them. For example, we need a sewage disposal plant in my constituency to ensure the bathing quality of our coastal areas, but who wants to live next to a sewage works? Surely the best place for a sewage works is in the countryside, but that counts as development. People who are against all development in the countryside say that such plants cannot be built there, but where do we put them? Anglian Water want to put a plant right next to a village.

All the people in the village of Corton are, rightly, up in arms at the thought of having a sewage works on their doorstep. The place for a sewage works is further out in the countryside where it can be landscaped. In fact, sewage works in the countryside protect it, because nobody would seek to build housing estates in the area.

In East Anglia, the same thing happens with turkey farms. Bernard Matthews has to raise turkeys before he can employ people to turn the turkeys into food. The company adds huge value to the East Anglian economy, but every time it wants to erect large sheds for the turkeys—they are not battery turkeys, because they can run around—it faces huge opposition because of the smell. However, those sheds are very important for the local economy, so some development in the countryside must be allowed.

We should use brown-field sites first, for both housing and industry. In Lowestoft, the main town in my constituency, there are acres of waterfront land where factories have closed and nothing is happening there. It is important that we regenerate such areas and locate industry there, instead of taking up green fields outside the town for new factories and businesses. However, some external support must be provided to enable development of those brown-field sites. I am pleased that English Partnerships has shown some interest in my area, but it will take a lot of support from Government to achieve regeneration of such areas.

I am pleased that the Rogers task force is compiling a register of sites because, if we are to address the question of the dispersal of industrial activity and prosperity, we must have an oversight of each region or sub-region. If we do not develop brown-field sites in a town that needs development and at the same time allow green-field development in another town some 20 or 30 miles away that has no brown-field sites, we will not use up all the brown-field sites. We must consider that approach to the planning system to ensure that, within a sub-region, all brown-field sites are used up before new green-field sites. That is only a crude way of expressing the issue, but it is one idea for a dispersal mechanism. If we can achieve that, we will have a planning system that stimulates regeneration, instead of standing in its way, and that protects the countryside, in a way that has not been achieved before.

9.17 pm

Mr. Archie Norman (Tunbridge Wells): I am delighted to speak tonight on an issue that threatens to herald one of the great environmental disasters of the 21st century unless we address the matter early. We are examining changes that are irreversible and it is for that reason that they pose such a great threat. The speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames), who is no longer in his place, illustrated vividly the terrible tragedy that potentially faces West and Mid-Sussex, parts of the countryside that are a national treasure and irreplaceable. His point was not only that we risk losing the countryside, but that, today, communities in that countryside are living under the threat of development. That is a way of setting community against community. The decisions to be made could be regretted by generations to come.

Conservative Members, especially those new to the House, like myself, fully recognise that what we are saying today reflects a change in thinking that is not unique to this side of the House. It is a consequence of the learning that has taken place from the erosion of the countryside in the past two decades. The hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) raised the question of supermarket development, and I stress that I am not here tonight to speak for the supermarket retailing industry. However, as the hon. Gentleman raised the issue, I would point out that it is important to recognise that the supermarket industry has, for the most part, welcomed the tightening of planning restrictions, which is good for the industry and for the community.

More important, the hon. Member for Leicester, East noted that, as a consequence of that tightening up, market forces have ensured that people in the retailing industry have turned their minds with ingenuity and creativity to solutions using brown-field and town-centre sites. That would not have arisen without the tightening-up under the previous Government. The same analogy should be applied to housing, where tightening up restrictions on green-field sites—not only green belt—will result in the same ingenuity in architecture and development.

Mr. Drew: I have listened carefully to the hon. Gentleman. I would not put words into his mouth, but is he saying on behalf of the companies with which he is associated that they no longer intend to pursue their existing planning permissions outside town centres?

Mr. Norman: I explained that I am not here to speak for the supermarket industry, my interest in which is well known. It would not be appropriate to use the time of the House to pursue that when other hon. Members want to speak.

I want to discuss countryside issues, especially in my constituency, which is a spa town in a part of the country already facing saturation development. There is extreme congestion pressure and pressure on infrastructure such as schools and hospitals. We must recognise that other Government policies, such as the restriction on new road building and the cancellation of the A21 dualling project, have increased the pressure from congestion. Those policies fly in the face of encouraging new housing development, notably the building of 125,000 new homes in Kent.

In his opening remarks, the Minister claimed that the projections for the requirement to build some 4 million new houses are incapable of challenge. We all know that that is not the case. Good evidence on projections was submitted by Professor Glen Bramley to the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee. He said:

"Nevertheless, the household projections have attracted increasing attention and a range of critical comment, some at least of which cannot be lightly dismissed."

No Conservative Member pretends that we do not need to build new houses; we recognise that we do. It is a question of the extent and nature of the new housing developments required.

The assumptions of the new projections are open to question. We must recognise that straight-line projections based on demand such as this are first based on the assumption that we have to meet the demand as it appears; supply has to meet demand without any change in life style being sought, as mentioned my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray). We are approaching the point where that form of development is no longer sustainable. Life styles, modes of living, development and architecture will have to adapt accordingly.

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): The hon. Gentleman is a fellow Kent Member. Given what he has said, what did he think when, in 1996, the Tory Government forcibly increased the house-building target in Kent over what Kent county council had wanted?

Mr. Norman: I have already explained that this is today; we are talking about the future and the threat to the countryside now. We fully recognise that some past judgments might not be made in the same situation today.

It is important to recognise that the projections are high risk. They assume the continuity of today's life style. Important assumptions about migration and immigration are made. The requirements of immigrants are particularly important to the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman). They also assume a continuity of vacancy rates, which run at 4 per cent., as my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire said. A reduction of vacancy rates, compelled partly by market forces, to, say, 2 per cent., would result in 471,000 new homes being taken up, or about 10 per cent. of the total requirement. That shows that the projection is far from sacrosanct.

When the Secretary of State approved 2,500 new homes on green belt in Newcastle, there were already 4,000 empty homes in the Newcastle town centre area. Instead of giving permission for green-belt development, we must apply pressure to encourage architects and developers to find ingenious solutions in town centres. We would thereby solve half of the problem without sacrificing the countryside.

We must recognise the fragility of the projections. They are not certain. No one can predict with any degree of certainty what will be required in 2016. That is why green-belt and green-field developments should come last, not first. We should not give permission for new settlements in the countryside now. If they are required, they should follow on in a decade or so.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire also put forward a powerful argument for the nature of the new houses required. The projections do not show that we need hundreds of pastiche, new family houses in the countryside. In fact, 80 per cent. of the new household requirement is for single-person households. As Labour Members said, those include elderly people. Some of the dwellings will perhaps be for single-parent families and some will be for single people and students. Single-person households do not require houses in the countryside or on the edge of towns in green fields. Ideally, they require housing within the existing community. A greater density of housing and a re-configuration of the accommodation will be required in those communities. That is contrary to the effect of the Government's policy on new green-field development. Our best chance is not to give permission now and release land for green-field development, but to oblige developers and architects to find solutions in town centres.

Finally, the cost of green-field developments to the community and the public purse in the long run has an enormous multiplier effect, which is not necessarily the case with developments in towns. What was once a village called Paddock Wood in my constituency is now the major development centre in Tunbridge Wells. Migration into Paddock Wood is not from Tunbridge Wells and the surrounding community and does not consist of single person households. The development is for families moving from London and the Medway towns to Tunbridge Wells and the Kent countryside. The impact is not merely the loss of income-generating families to the Medway towns and the metropolitan conurbation, or the decline in school rolls in the city centre. We will have to build new schools and roads in Paddock Wood and the surrounding area, which will be a cost to the public purse. Green-field development is not merely environmentally destructive: it is a great deal more expensive and it is inappropriate to the requirements of single-person households in the Government's projections.

[Mr. Norman]

The Government claim to have moved to a decentralised approach to planning and housing requirements. In so far as that is the intention, it is welcome, but it has not happened. The London and south-east regional planning conference, Serplan, covers an area from Oxford to Folkestone. That is not local or decentralised. Regional is not local or democratic. There is no effective accountability and it is not likely to work.

In conclusion, I urge the Government to hear the plea of all those who are deeply concerned for their communities and the countryside. We recognise that thinking has developed and changed on the issue and we call upon the Government to move with the times so that their actions match the rhetoric. This evening, we have heard heart-felt pleas from Conservative Members and a great deal of eloquence, and not merely from my hon. Friend the Member for Mid–Sussex. We must recognise the risk of permanent destruction of the countryside. We must also recognise that developments proposed for the countryside will not meet future needs and that rethinking is urgently required.

9.29 pm

Barbara Follett (Stevenage): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate, to set the record straight on the reasons for the development to the west of Stevenage, and to outline what Hertfordshire county council intends to do to implement its structure plan in a responsible and sustainable fashion.

First, I have to repeat what has already been said: the 4.4 million target figure was a Conservative target figure and Hertfordshire county council was told that it had to provide the space for 65,000 houses by 2016. From 1994, Hertfordshire struggled to do that and it eventually found space for 54,000 houses on brown-field sites in towns and villages, but the problem of space for the remaining 11,000 houses proved intractable.

There was a proposal to build between Royston and Aston, which lie to the east of Stevenage, but that would have merged the two, to their detriment. There were also proposals that we should fill in Fairlands park, which is a recreation park in the centre of Stevenage, and use those few recreation sites we have in an already overcrowded town to provide brown-field sites. Anyone who knows the cost to the social fabric and the other consequences of overcrowding will realise that those were not sustainable options.

Finally, Hertfordshire county council decided reluctantly that it would have to build 1,000 houses in Hemel Hempstead and 10,000 to the west of Stevenage, close to the railway line and the A1(M). Those two developments would take up 800 hectares of green belt. To prevent the concreting over of England and the merging of Hitchin and Luton, Hertfordshire decided to put 5,400 new hectares into the green belt. That is a net gain of 4,600 hectares to the Hertfordshire green belt, which now totals 86,000 hectares. I do not know why Opposition Members think that that is irrelevant.

Mr. Heald: The point is that Hertfordshire had a consultants' report that said that every single one of the 65,000 houses could be provided within the envelopes of towns. Then, Labour-controlled Stevenage borough council offered to take 10,000 houses. That offer was grasped. Does the hon. Lady agree that, when considering the green belt, it is important to recognise that the land between Hitchin and Luton that is to be designated as green belt is prime agricultural land that is protected anyway?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The hon. Gentleman knows that he should not make a speech during an intervention.

Barbara Follett: I shall respond to the hon. Gentleman's point. The reason why Labour-controlled Stevenage council was not keen to have the houses built within the envelopes of towns was that they would be built mainly within the envelope of Stevenage, which is already overcrowded, and on the recreation park that I mentioned.

We hear a lot about 10,000 houses being built to the west of Stevenage. Phase 1, which should be complete by 2011, accounts for only 3,600 houses, and there is the potential for a further 1,400 houses to be built after 2011. There is no certainty that the other 5,000 will be built, but they will be built only if they are needed. I shall outline what Hertfordshire county council wants to do with the development west of Stevenage.

Hertfordshire has a proud history. It is where the first garden cities were developed by Ebenezer Howard—Letchworth in 1903 and Welwyn Garden City in 1919. Through the development west of Stevenage, Hertfordshire wants to build another garden city. Under the garden city 2000 project, the council has conducted a lengthy consultation with local people, especially those who are against the development. Last weekend, at the John Henry Newman school in my constituency, 330 people met for two days to draw the outline plan for the development and to discuss what it could and should contain. I welcome that initiative by Hertfordshire county council, which is exactly what the Government want to encourage, as it involves local people in local plans at an extremely local level. We are putting in place measures to preserve the environment and to ensure that the countryside and the town merge.

I know that Conservatives are as concerned as I am about the erosion of the green belt. I have a great deal of respect for the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) and I know that his views are sincere. I shall work with him to do as much as possible to make the new garden city development a good one.

However, we know that the problem is serious. It is predicted that, overall, there will be 23 per cent. more households in Britain by 2016. There will be 29 per cent. more households in the eastern region, where my constituency is situated, and 29 per cent. more in the south-west.

Mr. Blunt: Does the hon. Lady accept that those projections are amenable to change by social and fiscal policies?

Barbara Follett: I do, and I know that the auditor's figures show that the projections can vary by as much as plus or minus 3 per cent. The projections are difficult and not particularly reliable, and, at some stage, we must consider how they can be reformed. However, we have to

work with the figures that we have. I would welcome a more sensible and measured debate about this very emotional and difficult problem. I deplore the mindless and hectoring fashion in which certain Conservative Members—notably the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns)—introduced the debate. His manner demeaned his office and degraded his argument. I had hoped for better.

9.37 pm

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): It is a pleasure on this guest appearance to see that the Government are fielding such a distinguished team. The Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning apparently has a new role as First Minister for England, while the Minister for London and Construction is a putative but bashful candidate for mayor of London. Such luminaries do not often share the Front Bench to reply to a debate. I have been looking up, in the *Evening Standard*, all the non-endorsements for the Minister for London and Construction in the campaign that has not yet started on his behalf.

I regret that the Deputy Prime Minister is not present, but I know that he will be extremely familiar with the inner city, because he flies over it so frequently—no doubt on his way to a spot of wealth creation.

Dr. Ladyman: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Curry: No, not for the moment, although I will later.

The House agrees that, if we are to save the green belt and do our best to ensure that development in the countryside is minimised, we must be serious about developing the inner city. The two go together; they are not options.

If we are to recapture the city and reuse the land, we must do it without starting from the basis of illusion. There is a belief that, if one improves schools and transport in the inner city and makes sure that the streets are safe, people automatically will want to live there. Some will, and doing that much will make it easier for people to live there. However, a strong aspirational element is also at work, as the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Mr. Pickthall) pointed out: people want to move out of such areas because they consider that that will better their condition and, perhaps, their status. That has happened throughout our history, and politicians must be careful before they decide that there is a point at which that process must be brought to an end.

The city must be made to work. A long time ago, I read a book by Jane Jacobs called "The Death and Life of the Great American City". It is one of the great formative books on planning. Her central thesis was that the city had gone wrong because we had started dividing it up into different functions. As a result, we lost much of the cohesion—the informal supervision of people—that obtained in the middle of a city. We had been required to police and manage the city because we had denied the community the ability to police and manage the city itself. If we can get back to some of those concepts in our development, we will save ourselves a great deal of trouble. It is an expensive business, and it would be foolish to pretend that it could be done easily or on the cheap. Lots of land in cities is contaminated, having had gasworks on it. The Minister for London and Construction represents Greenwich, and he will know better than most the history of munitions and chemicals and the sheer amount of work required to put land right.

We must make sure that we have the right players, playing the right game. The players are the Government, through their regional proposals and their planning rules; the new development agencies which are about to come into existence; the local authorities; housing associations and voluntary groups; and the private sector.

I agreed with much of what was said by the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor). The figure of 4.4 million hovers over our debate like a dark and threatening cloud. However, that figure reflects what is happening in our society—longevity, divorce, people who have never married. I would love to be able to wish the figure away and to think that it is fundamentally wrong, but all the history suggests that it may be too modest rather than too great. We may be lucky to get away with that figure.

That is an example of how aspirations run up against the needs of the wider community. The devolution of decisions to the regions will not help matters. That does not alter the problem; it merely alters the number of people who can take decisions. The danger is that we are passing the parcel. The places where people want to live and the places where the used land exists do not coincide with all the happy convenience that the Government would wish.

I used to go around the country to find people saying, "Let them live in Liverpool." There was an enormous enthusiasm for living in Liverpool among people who knew that they would never be asked to do so. It is amazing that Liverpool has not been repopulated at colossal speed, given the enthusiasm of people to send others to live there. The hon. Member for West Lancashire has pointed out, however, that some people may actually want to move away from Merseyside, an area that is depopulating.

We must recognise the real problem. The achievement of individual aspiration sometimes comes up against the interest of the community. The whole planning problem is about how we get those two things into sensible equilibrium. The community itself often wants sensitive economic development: people in the area around Cambridge would not want not to have the economic success that has happened there, but it has brought its problems. Planning is about reconciliation, compromise and equilibrium.

At the same time, people have palpable concerns. When people set up home in a new environment, it is natural that they become defensive about it. My hon. Friends the Members for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames), for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) and for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) have talked about the sheer sense of permanent uncertainty that surrounds people, and about the sheer length of time it takes before decisions are taken. There is also a sense of despoilation of the very environments to which people move, and the resulting choking of services. Often, the environment that is being quit is not improved, and the environment to which people move is also degraded. That is the worst of both worlds.

[Mr. Curry]

The Government can do some things to accelerate the process of making inner cities more developable and livable, an idea that lies at the heart of their argument. We do not have to wait for Lord Rogers to decide.

First, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire said, there is the value added tax on house repairs. There is 17.5 per cent. VAT on 800,000 empty homes in England and Wales, but zero VAT on building on green-field sites. Not all those homes are where people want them to be, but they should be coupled with sensible social housing policies in areas such as the north-east. Frankly, there is a persuasive case for stopping building new social housing in Newcastle, given the empties there.

Secondly, housing associations are major players in the city centres and their permitted purposes could be changed to encourage them into regeneration. They should get out of social security, and into economic development, building more houses for the marketplace and for selling. They are in business, they are successful and they bring in private sector funding. They are capable of developing economic regeneration in the cities.

Thirdly, we should see an accelerated programme of housing transfers, perhaps to community trusts. Transfers do not have to go to the private sector or to housing associations. That notion was regarded as scandalous when the previous Government introduced it, but people in Liverpool, Manchester and other places are falling over themselves to have houses transferred because they know that there is no ghost of a chance of the Exchequer providing the public funds that would put those houses in order.

What about allowing local authorities to keep a proportion of the business rate for specific economic regeneration programmes, provided—*[Interruption.]* I say this knowing that the Government have just said that they do not intend to return it for at least 10 years, because local government has been let off the chain and decanted into its gilded cage by the Government. How about a little bit of business rate for economic regeneration programmes, provided that they are in partnership and provided that they lever in private finance, at least on a one-to-one basis? Then they could keep that bit of extra business rate. When the Government talk about local government's community role, they will be giving it some of the means to deliver that.

How about going further and allowing local authorities to levy a small supplementary rate, with the agreement of business, subject to a ballot, to use for economic regeneration—for surveillance cameras and street improvements? *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The House must come to order. The right hon. Gentleman is addressing the House. [HON. MEMBERS: "We are enjoying it."] Well, perhaps hon. Members will enjoy the speech in silence.

Mr. Curry: I would hate to have been greeted entirely in silence. I do not mind terribly from which side of House the silence and which side the noise comes.

This is a Government who are supposed to be liberating local government. I am trying to give them one or two hints on how they might manage that. So far, it is all rhetoric and little action, as the hon. Member for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen), who is the Government Whip on the Local Government Bill, will be able to testify.

The hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) was right when he talked about planning delays. They are enormous. It can take more than a year for an inquiry to get under way, even after a call-in. That freezes development comprehensively. The Government have had nearly two years to start getting that right and it is about time that they did so.

If the Government are serious about regeneration—another matter that is also very much part of the DETR's patch—and about local government playing a central role in that, they should revise the local government finance system and its indicators, so that they are less a reflection of the static side of a community and look forward to the dynamic that a community is supposed to be undertaking. At the moment, that is not the case, and local authorities find it difficult, when they really wish to be ambitious—few of them do wish to be ambitious—to carry that through into practice.

The Government need to ensure that education action zones and other such initiatives are co-ordinated with the regeneration programmes so that the right hand knows what the left hand can do. If the Department for Education and Employment can be elbowed, kicking and screaming, into the regional office structure, that would do a lot of good.

The regional development agencies will be in charge of medium-term planning and the regional planning will be on the longer term. Those need to work together. Getting the local authorities and the development agencies on the same side, pushing in the same direction, will not be an easy task. They will have to have a focus. If they try to spread their efforts everywhere, they will do nothing but irritate over a wide area. If they are sensible, they can be effective; but they will have to make difficult choices to do that.

The Government spend much time telling us of their aspirations. They spend a great deal of time setting up one group and another group. Meanwhile, we have hesitation, fragmentation and the total absence of joined-up thinking. Here are some simple measures that the Government could undertake rapidly that would put substance on their aspirations. The Opposition have the aspirations, but for the moment the Government have nothing but empty rhetoric on a subject crucial to masses of British people.

9.49 pm

The Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning (Mr. Richard Caborn): The contribution of the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) was spoiled at the end. It has been good to listen to him. I do not know how the Opposition passed the hat around this afternoon to determine who would reply to the debate. I hope that what the right hon. Gentleman said will begin to be reflected in Conservative policy. When he was talking about taxation, the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) went white, because he could see it costing his old business a few bob. When we read *Hansard* tomorrow, we shall be able to contrast the opening contribution from the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns), who said that he was initiating the fourth debate on behalf of the Conservatives, with the winding-up speech, and we shall see quite a difference.

To put the record straight, the motion is ill-informed because the regional development agencies will not be involved in land use planning. I am surprised that the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon mentioned that. Those agencies are not involved in land use or transport planning; they will be left in the democratic process and will be done through the regional planning guidance.

I shall deal first with the 60 per cent. target in respect of previously developed land. I must tell the Liberal Democrats that we have been systematically examining land use, transport and spatial planning to make sure that, when we publish our proposals, which we will do on PPG11, PPG12 and PPG3, they will all dovetail and that is exactly what the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) was asking for. I assure him that the consultation process, which has been wide and in depth, will ensure, once and for all, that we get it right. We are dealing with some very difficult problems. The Opposition have been playing gesture politics, whereas we are genuinely trying to tackle the structural problems that we inherited from the previous Administration.

Let us go back a few years and consider the arguments deployed by people such as Lord Tebbit, who told people to get on their bikes, come to the south-east and get a job. Well, people did that in the 1970s and 1980s, and there is now tremendous overheating—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Mid–Sussex (Mr. Soames) went on the rabbit run—or was it the chicken run?—from Crawley. No doubt, he has added to the housing demand there.

We will meet our 60 per cent. target, and we will do so by having, for the first time ever, a land use database. Yes, we will be reflecting on what Lord Rogers is doing in the task force; yes, we will be introducing new regional planning proposals; and yes, we will have land use change statistics. When all that is done, we will not only meet the 60 per cent. target, but go further and make sure that each region has the ability to make sure that happens.

The only way we shall end predict and provide is by putting proper planning practice into operation. We will make sure, through the regional development agencies, that we address the under-utilisation of the economies in many parts of the United Kingdom, and England in particular. Unfortunately, another legacy of the previous Administration is that no English region outside London is performing, in wealth creation terms, to the average of the European regions in respect of gross domestic product per capita. Cornwall in the south-west is down to 69 per cent. of the EU average; Merseyside is down to 72 per cent.; and the whole of the north-east is down to 80 per cent. That economic deficit is the Conservative legacy that we are trying to tackle. It was in part the result of the type of policy pursued by Lord Tebbit when he encouraged people to get on their bikes. We will be following through in terms of those planning guidance documents—

Mr. Lansley: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Caborn: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman because I gave him a promise when I spoke previously on these matters.

Mr. Lansley: The Minister is on exactly the right point, and I am grateful to him. He is repeating his speech of 22 October, but not the point where he promised that he would provide a draft of PPG3 by the time our examination in public was taking place in East Anglia. That examination is occcurring now and the hon. Gentleman has not kept his promise. Where is his draft PPG3? How can the sequential approach be applied to regional planning guidance in the absence of the Government's illustration of what it means?

Mr. Caborn: I can give the hon. Gentleman an answer and offer him an apology that I did not get out a draft PPG3 before the examination in public in the eastern region. The hon. Gentleman has made about the best contribution this evening from the Opposition Benches. That shows the shallowness of the Opposition's arguments. I accept that we have not brought out PPG3. However, I am sure that, when it does come out, the hon. Gentleman will recognise that it dovetails into an area that we have been examining extremely seriously—introducing regional planning guidance that will integrate transport, land use and spatial planning.

The process has proved a little more difficult than I envisaged a few months ago. However, we will get it right. We will ensure that we do not have the mistakes that we had in the past, which were made by previous Administrations. I hope that, in the next few weeks, we shall bring out planning policy guidance notes 11, 12 and 13. As for PPG3, I think that we will be responding positively by giving tools to local authorities to ensure that the sequential test, as embodied in PPG6, is in PPG3 as well. There will be a comprehensive review of that planning, as we promised in "Modernising Planning". We shall also consider how we can factor in the spatial planning perspective that comes from the European Union.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: If the Minister takes the view that the 60 per cent. target for brown-field sites cannot be given over to each individual authority, which it surely cannot, what mechanism will the Government use to ensure that, overall, that target is reached?

Mr. Caborn: As I have said, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister gave that commitment, and we are genuinely working towards it. When we came into office, we were amazed, given the previous Conservative Government's rhetoric on brown-field sites, that there was no land use databank to tell us what brown-field sites we had in the United Kingdom. The lack of hard statistical data on which to base any decisions was amazing. Those data were not in the Department. We have had to go systematically through the information that is available and we shall bring that in. We hope that the database will be available to us by the end of March. That will be a starting point. We are thankful to local authorities that have enabled us, through English Partnerships, to make this progress.

The Opposition's motion amounts to hypocrisy. I can tell the House that 50 per cent. of all out-of-town space developed since 1950 was built in only five years—1985 to 1990. I shall finish by setting out the record of the Conservative Administration. During every one of the last years of the decade that the Conservative party was in power, there was a net loss to the green belt. I shall set out the figures in reverse order as is done in Miss World competitions. No. 4, 1989–90, an overall 35 hectares were lost. Who was responsible for that? The answer is the

[Mr. Caborn]

right hon. Chris Patten. No. 3, 1990–92, 100 hectares were lost. Who was responsible? The answer is the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine). No. 2, 1992–97— *[Interruption.]* The Opposition can have it whether they like it or not. During 1992–97, 170 hectares of green belt were lost. Who was responsible for that? The answer is the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard). No.—

Mr. James Arbuthnot (North-East Hampshire) *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Question put accordingly, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 164, Noes 320.

Division No. 55] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Sir David Madel and
Mrs. Caroline Spelman.

NOES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Caborn, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*

Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Sloate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Welsh, Andrew
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wills, Michael
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Jane Kennedy and
Mr. David Clelland.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 318, Noes 160.

Division No. 56] **[10.14 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive

Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
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McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Malaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Welsh, Andrew
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wills, Michael
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*

Wise, Audrey
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Clelland and Jane Kennedy.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Sir David Madel and Mrs. Caroline Spelman.

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the Government's continued commitment to protecting the countryside, including green belts, and promoting sustainable regeneration in towns and cities; recognises that the Government's decentralised and integrated policy approach, as stated in Planning for Communities of the Future, Modernising the Planning System and A New Deal for Transport, is helping to achieve more sustainable and equitable patterns of urban and rural development; welcomes the Government's commitment strictly to control development in the open countryside and to increase the proportion of new housing on previously-developed land in urban areas, smaller towns and villages from 40 per cent in the mid-1980s to 60 per cent; recognises the need to replace the previous predict and provide approach to the issue of household growth with a more flexible decentralised system, involving realistic regional targets for the building of new homes on recycled land, tighter controls on urban sprawl, new regional and housing planning guidance to ensure the adoption of sustainable solutions to housing development and more rigorous and detailed assessment of land availability; and believes that the Government's inter-linked policies for urban regeneration and protection of the countryside will enhance the quality of life for people in both rural and urban areas.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES

That the draft European Communities (Definition of Treaties) (North-East Atlantic Fisheries Commission) Order 1999, which was laid before this House on 11th January, be approved.

That the draft European Communities (Immunities and Privileges of the North-East Atlantic Fisheries Commission) Order 1999, which was laid before this House on 11th January, be approved.—*[Mr. Hanson.]*

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Hospitalfield, Arbroath

10.25 pm

Mr. Andrew Welsh (Angus): I am presenting this petition on behalf of the Hospitalfield area residents committee and the residents of the Hospitalfield housing estate in Arbroath, who wish to protest against the environmental problems with which they have been confronted over many years and seek action from the Government to investigate, cure and solve those problems. The petition is signed by members of the Hospitalfield area residents committee—Mr. and Mrs. Wright, Mr. and Mrs. Dear, Mr. Bill Kerr and Mrs. Meldrum—and has the backing of 688 members of the wider local community.

The petition reads:

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for Scotland

(1) to take whatever steps may be necessary to stop this pollution from continuing, and

(2) to ensure that an investigation takes place into how this situation came about and into why it has been allowed to continue for more than two and a half years.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Education Services (Somerset)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Hanson.]*

10.26 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I am extremely pleased to have the opportunity to address the House on the important issue of education services in Somerset and their funding. I confess to a sense of deja vu, in two respects. I seem to have secured a number of Adjournment debates on the subject during the brief time that I have been a Member of this place. My first Adjournment debate—on 12 June 1997, in which I made my second speech in the Chamber—was on exactly the same subject.

I make no apology for that, because, sadly, the points that I made then are still as relevant today. Although I may sometimes be a little bored of making the same points—the Minister may be bored of hearing them, from me and others—that is nothing against the annual anguish of councillors, governors, teachers and parents, who wrestle with budgets that simply do not work.

If I wanted evidence of that, I should have only to read the letters that have been sent again by schools up and down my constituency, from Huish Episcopi school; Milborne Port county primary; Sexey's school, which is a grant-maintained school making the same point; Nunney county first; Countess Gytha school in Queen Camel. A letter has also come from Berkley parish council, and all those letters make the same point: the present funding arrangements for Somerset do not work.

I also feel a sense of deja vu because we had a near-identical debate only two weeks ago in the Chamber, initiated by my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb). It was an excellent debate, with very much the same cast of characters: the same Minister and the same hon. Members on this side of the Chamber. The west country mafia was spread around both sides of the House—

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): And not a Tory in sight.

Mr. Heath: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct.

My modest request to the Minister is that her civil servants provide her with a slightly different brief this evening, not simply one with South Gloucestershire crossed out and Somerset put in.

What is the problem? It is simply that the revenue support system does not come close to providing sufficient to enable Somerset county council to provide school services at the level that I, and the Minister, would want. That is not unique to Somerset; it appears to be the case for almost all authorities in the rural south-west. That is a significant problem.

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): I gave my hon. Friend notice that I should like to intervene.

Is not that problem compounded by areas, such as my constituency, that have rising numbers of pupils which are not reflected in the standard spending assessment totals? That is obviously a problem in Somerset, as it is in South

Gloucestershire, and the sums of money that come from the Government lag behind the expenditure of the schools concerned.

Mr. Heath: I am grateful to my honourable and elegant Friend for that intervention. He is absolutely right, and the point was amplified by my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon in the recent debate.

The Department for Education and Employment admits that Somerset is hard done by. I had a meeting with the Secretary of State, who freely admitted that, when in opposition, he used to quote the Somerset factor in evidence. The sparsity factor and the other factors used to derive the formula work to the disadvantage of a small number of authorities spread around the country, particularly in the south-west of England.

I have a letter to one of my constituents from Mr. Niall Forde, a civil servant in the Department, who says:

"Ministers recognise that historically there has been a very real difficulty for Somerset, because of under-funding over many years."

This is not a recent phenomenon: it has gone on year after year. It was a problem when I became leader of the county council in 1985, and it has been a problem ever since.

What has been Somerset's response to that problem over the years? It has provided more money from local resources. It has massively topped up the amount that the Government provide for education from other resources available to it. That has averaged £10 million a year over and above the standard spending assessment, which is £40 million from local funds in the past four years. I do not take the SSA as an adequate measure of what should be spent, but nevertheless it is what the Government officially say should be spent on education. That £40 million has not come out of thin air: it has come from the budgets for highways, social services and other essential services provided by the county council.

I fully accept that the Government's generosity has increased this year. They have recognised that there is a problem with overall education funding, and they have sought to respond. Indeed, there is an increase in the education SSA for Somerset of £10.6 million for next year, and that is very welcome. On the face of it, that should be very good news, but—and it is a big but—sadly, that increase merely brings the SSA up to fractionally more than the real expenditure this year. That is the constant funding trap in which authorities that spend massively over their SSA year on year find themselves.

The total expenditure increase for the authority is £15.5 million. If the authority spends that much, it will increase its council tax by 6.4 per cent. We are told that the Government's view is that the increase should be 4.5 per cent., so immediately there is a discrepancy between the two.

It would be wrong for me to expect the Minister to be an expert in this area, but she should know that the county council has other commitments apart from education. It has non-service commitments—£6 million comes out of the extra money for items such as landfill tax and land drainage. If the Minister saw the water levels in Somerset at the moment, she would realise how important land drainage is in that area. We have a serious problem.

What is wrong with the system as it stands? The area cost adjustment is often referred to as the tax on the west, although it could just as easily be described as the tax on the north or the tax on the midlands. It is the tax on those areas that are not in the south-east and do not have the benefit of the adjustment.

The Government's view has always been that they would like to change the area cost adjustment, but they cannot get unanimity among local authorities. Of course they will not get unanimity among local authorities. I was a leading member of the Association of County Councils for years, and I could not get unanimity in the association, because those who represented Sussex, Hampshire and the other authorities that benefited from the area cost adjustment were not going meekly to say that they would give it up. The fact is that it is wrong and is based on a wrong methodology, and it must be removed. It is worth £2.2 million to Somerset in terms of its education expenditure.

There are other factors in the education formula, such as pupil weighting, which is worth £3 million in Somerset, and additional educational needs, which is worth £5.7 million. So £8.7 million is missing from the Somerset education budget simply because of the perverse effect of the methodology used for those formulae.

The problem is that Ministers say that they cannot obtain unanimity, but they will never do so on such matters because losers will not happily accept that they should be losers. It is central Government's job to decide what is equitable and the present situation is patently not equitable. Other factors also have an effect. For example, in a rural county such as Somerset with many small village schools, the unit costs of providing the same level of education are inevitably higher.

Jackie Ballard (Taunton): Is my hon. Friend aware that the chairman of governors at Cheddon Fitzpaine primary school in my constituency resigned this week? It is a very successful school and she has been the chair of governors for 10 years, but she resigned because of the twin pressures of budget difficulties continuing year after year and the extra innovations that the Government have loaded on to schools. The school will find it difficult to find anyone to replace her and many areas have a shortage of people willing to become governors.

Mr. Heath: My hon. Friend is right. I know the lady in question and I know the value of her service to that school. My wife is a governor of a small rural school and my children attend such schools. They face difficulties because people are fed up of wrestling with budgets time after time.

The effect of more pupils in Somerset has already been mentioned, but this year it will cost an extra £1.5 million simply to accommodate the extra pupils on the rolls. Also, every 1 per cent. of the teachers' pay awards that is not budgeted for in the Government's figures costs Somerset another £800,000 to £900,000. The county council is, of course, able to operate expediencies. It can continue to spend in excess of its SSA on education, as it has for the past 10 years. However, it may face capping, whether it is crude and universal or secretive and targeted. Whichever it is, it still exists.

The county council also faces the problems caused by increasing the council tax—an increase that many in rural areas cannot afford. Then there is the effect on other services. I have mentioned social services and I worry greatly that Somerset spends below its SSA on

[Mr. Heath]

social services. That is an essential part of the council's work, but it reduces spending on it to meet the needs of the education budget. The council also faces the lack of real improvement in standards in schools, which the Minister would love to see. Of course, the non-school services are also constantly being squeezed.

The Government's actions, including the introduction of a three-year stability programme, should ameliorate the situation. However, if they dip the present formula in aspic and use it for the next three years, they will do counties such as Somerset no favours because all that will do is maintain an unfair position. In reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon in his recent Adjournment debate, the Minister suggested that the additional funds might provide a valuable mechanism for rectifying some of the faults in the system. However, although Somerset is very pleased about the result of its bid to the standards fund, that extra funding has to be matched. If an authority has not got the spare cash to match that funding, it has to take it out of the already allocated schools budget. The authority is in a cleft stick, because it can only improve one area to the detriment of another.

The money for the reduction of class sizes is also good news and I welcome it. The Government are doing a tremendous job, but if class sizes are reduced at the bottom end of schools by improving the funding of primary schools, any cuts in services must be concentrated on the middle and secondary schools, which also cannot afford any reductions.

I hope that it is common ground between the Minister and myself that the quality of education in Somerset is extremely good. I hope that she also recognises that the local authority has shown its commitment year after year to making education its priority. It displays a high degree of efficiency and effectiveness in its administration and delegates a high proportion of its spending to its schools. The fact remains that the SSA per pupil is well below the national average. Compared to some of the London authorities, it is £1,000 per pupil lower. I cannot accept that for my children or my constituents' children. I cannot accept that they are second-class pupils because they happen to live in Somerset and to benefit from its countryside. The Government must demonstrate their commitment to extending what they are saying and doing in education overall to every part of the country. At present, the formula prevents that.

I am sick and tired of bringing this case to Government each year. I did it as leader of the council, as chairman of education, for the county council and now I do it as a Member of Parliament. It is the same case year after year because it is the same problem year after year. I do not want the chairs of governing bodies, head teachers and parents to go through the same ritual year after year of writing letters and applying pressure to the Department for Education and Employment when the fact is that the formula is wrong and needs changing. I invite the Minister to put what pressure she can on the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to ensure that, next year, Somerset has the funding that it deserves to run its schools as they should be run.

10.40 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): I congratulate the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) on securing this debate. It is a little like deja vu because the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) had a similar debate a week ago. I will try not to be too repetitive but I hope that the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome understands that the explanation that I gave his colleague is very much the one that I will give him, but I will tailor it to suit Somerset.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome described this as a south-west problem, but it is not. I hear about the problem that we inherited on how standard spending assessments are worked out wherever I go. In the west midlands, where my constituency lies, people from Staffordshire and Derbyshire speak with the same feeling as people from Somerset. In my travels, I have not yet met anyone who said how generously they are funded by SSA and called for the longed-for review. I suspect that I am in for a spate of Adjournment debates over the next few weeks as hon. Members rightly secure debates on their education settlements. I look forward to the first Member who joins us in claiming that a review of SSAs is long overdue but says that his or her area receives too much. That is the difficulty.

I am delighted to be able to respond to one of the points raised by the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome. I congratulate those in Somerset and his constituency on the standards of education. They achieve above the national level: 51 per cent. of Somerset pupils obtain five or more GCSEs at grades A to C. Key stage 2 tests show 67 per cent. of pupils achieving better than the national average. The same is true at each key stage. Such achievement is not brought about without much hard work, I extend my thanks and congratulations. I extend them also to local authorities in Somerset that have made the difficult decision to spend more than their education SSA because, as a constituency Member, I know the consequences for other services. I am happy to oblige the hon. Gentleman on both points.

I disagree with the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome on one matter. I understand his frustration in all the different guises of his relationship with Somerset, as parent, governor, councillor and Member of Parliament. I understand his frustration with repeating the same argument in different forums year after year but this is our second year of being answerable for that. It was a different Government with different priorities that answered previous queries. I understand his frustration but I am answerable only for our actions over the past 18 months.

I want to put the matter in the context of the increased funding that there has been. I am sorry that a chair of governors decided to resign because we need good quality people in such positions. In thanking that person for their years of service, I wonder whether a review of that decision might be appropriate. Year after year, governing bodies have had to struggle with reduced budgets. It is ironic that, in the first year that we are getting really expanded budgets, high-calibre chairs of governors should choose to resign. I make that point to the constituent of the hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard). Such people know the national context in which we are operating, with a doubling of capital funding between now and 2002 and an average £10 billion increase over the next three years in money going to local authorities.

That money was already going to come through next year, and the hon. Gentleman was kind enough to acknowledge that. Whereas, nationally, SSAs will increase by 5.7 per cent., the SSA for his area will increase by 6.5 per cent. I realise that the extra is to account for increased numbers, even if they were counted 18 months ago, so I do not pretend that it is an effort to remedy the SSA.

I was also pleased that the hon. Gentleman acknowledged that, where we have the power to bring more money into schools without changing the SSA, we have done so. He cannot claim as much sorrow as his hon. Friend the Member for Northavon, whose authority is bottom of the table. Sadly, that is not a position on which any hon. Members would pride themselves. The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome represents an area that is certainly in the bottom half as regards SSA. I think that 29 local authorities have SSAs that make them worse off and have more cause to complain than the hon. Gentleman, but I am not trying to justify that, to make light of the load or to say that he ought to feel better.

This year, we have managed to increase the standards fund to Somerset by about 70 per cent. above our increase in funding last year. The Government's authority receives the national average when it comes to allocation of standards funding. Although I certainly accept the argument that it is receiving less SSA than he and his constituents have a right to expect, I assure him that, where we have been able to act within the formula, we have not treated Somerset less favourably than other local authorities. I hope that his constituents and the chairs of governors, who rightly worry about that, realise and acknowledge that fact. Somerset received £378,000 so that it could begin to implement class size policy early. Of course, that is not matched money—it is 100 per cent. from the standards fund.

There will be other initiatives. The hon. Gentleman is concerned about a school in his constituency that has a class of 38. I am considering a petition, which he presented to the House, and I will be in a position to reply to his constituents shortly. I understand that it is not a key stage 1 class, otherwise it would be dealt with. I hope that he will accept that the 20,000 classroom assistants, who will be funded through the standards fund, will be the sort of resource that will allow the adult-to-pupil ratio in that key stage 2 class to be better by the time of the next election.

The nub of the issue is SSAs. I will not this year, or any year, defend what I believe to be an inequitable distribution of resource. The hon. Gentleman may have been quoting me exactly when he said that, if we waited around for unanimity, we would never get anywhere. If that was a quote from my reply to the hon. Member for Northavon, I am grateful for the opportunity to restate it. I fear that, if we stand around waiting for unanimity, we will never get anywhere. I would certainly not want to wait that long and I know that we have to act before we achieve unanimity.

I also acknowledge that the transition from being favourably funded to being equally funded is difficult. The hon. Gentleman and I may comment on the fact that authorities do not volunteer that they are too favourably treated by the SSA. However, the reality is that not one local authority or school feels that it is overfunded.

Mr. David Heath: The hon. Lady is right. No one will volunteer that, which is why it is so important to take the opportunity of rising budgets within her Department to make that transition. If it does not happen now, it will never happen. That is what worries me about the fact that we appear to be stuck with those SSAs for the two or three-year period that has been suggested. If that is the case, there is no relief for people in Somerset and in similar authorities who are stuck with the poor spending patterns that they inherited from councils that are long forgotten.

Ms Morris: I accept that, and the hon. Gentleman has a valid point. I do not envisage that increased education budgets will stop in three years. We are part of a Government who are committed to expenditure on education and that commitment is not for the short-term, just for the length of this comprehensive spending review settlement. We have always said that we shall seek to increase education budgets year on year, and we shall be judged on that commitment. I accept that it is far easier to make the transition in times of increasing budgets—I dare say that it would be almost impossible at times of decreasing budgets—so I agree that we must seize the opportunity to do so while we have a Government who are committed to securing what resources they can from the Treasury and putting the money into education.

Somerset has not only been underfunded this year—the problem with its SSA is historic and has gone on for years—but the hon. Gentleman must realise that the huge change necessary must be seen in the context of all SSAs. Somerset's is not the only SSA that was up for review. Had changes to the education SSA been made alongside changes to the children's services SSA in the social services budget, the statistics show that certain authorities—London authorities, which suffer a fair degree of poverty—would have been clobbered twice. Although my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I are driven by our desire to get a fairer system of funding, neither of us, nor any of our colleagues at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, could justify pushing that agenda this year, given all the other changes taking place.

Mr. Heath: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Morris: Yes, but I suspect that it will have to be the last time.

Mr. Heath: I am listening carefully and I am grateful to the Minister for what she has said. I hope that she will not consider it a cheap point, but it is one that parents will inevitably make, because their children are going through the system now. We have waited for years and the sense of impatience is causing desperation in many of our schools, which is why we want quick results. I do not expect her to be able to wave a magic wand, but I do expect the process to start and that is what I am asking her to ensure.

Ms Morris: The hon. Gentleman is right, but the process has started and it will continue. As he will know, we have held extensive talks with local authorities over the past six to 12 months and we are hopeful that the change will be brought about. Only relatively recently did we realise that we could not secure that change and arrive at a reasonable state of affairs for all local authorities with which we felt at ease. However, we have asked local

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authorities to continue to talk, not with a view to obtaining unanimity, but with a flexibility that will allow everyone to reach the point at which we can justify changes to each other.

The London authorities argue not that it is right that they are better funded than others, but that they would find it difficult to cope with reduced funding—not that they are entitled to be better funded, but that they are entitled to be funded at the level at which they are currently funded. The good news is that there is an acceptance that the conversation must continue. The issue crosses party boundaries and splits along parochial lines, and my hope is that those parochial lines will converge over the next two to three years.

The hon. Gentleman is right to say that there will be no change made to SSAs for another three years but, at the end of those three years, I shall be disappointed if, with our local authority partners, we have not managed to secure a fairer way of allocating resources from central Government to local authorities. I do not underestimate how difficult that task will be, but I have a clearer understanding of the difficulties ahead than I had 12 months ago.

My final point goes to parents in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. He can take the message back that I have heard what their Member of Parliament has to say; I accept that, historically, they have not been fairly funded and that they have a right to secure from any Government a promise that all children be treated, not equally, but as individuals of equal worth who have a right to a similar standard of education and to the resources necessary to achieve that. We shall continue to work on the formula in the hope of securing a better one soon.

Meanwhile, we are delighted to have been able to secure for the hon. Gentleman's constituents an increase in funding that is probably the largest increase that Somerset has received for a considerable time and an increase in standards funding that will benefit students in his constituency. That is our notion of partnership. We can contribute to the hard work that teachers, pupils and parents in Somerset are already doing to drive our common agenda and to make sure that all children receive a standard of education of which they and we can be proud.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at five minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 4 February 1999

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

The Minister was asked—

Madam Speaker: I call Question 1.

Mr. Ben Chapman (Wirral, South) *rose—*

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): With permission, Madam Speaker, I will answer Question 1 at 12.30 pm.

Pesticides

2. **Mr. Jonathan Shaw** (Chatham and Aylesford): What reviews he is undertaking of the use of pesticides in agriculture. [67797]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Jeff Rooker): The pesticides safety directorate is reviewing the use of 49 pesticide active substances as part of the national review programme of older pesticides. In addition, the directorate is playing its full part in the European review programme, which is examining 83 active substances. Furthermore, several hundred pesticide uses, which have been on provisional approval only for three years, are being considered at my request.

Mr. Shaw: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. What is his Department doing to ensure the provision of information and data about older pesticides? What is he doing about organophosphate pesticides, in the light of growing public concern? What reviews will the pesticides safety directorate conduct in future?

Mr. Rooker: In response to public concern, a major national review of organophosphate pesticides, and compounds with similar actions, is in progress. Human safety is our key concern, and it will not be compromised. In addition, the Committee on the Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment, and other Government advisory committees, are considering the scientific evidence on the possible impact of long-term, low-level exposure to organophosphates. We should have the interim report in the spring, and, by the summer, a report that draws some conclusions.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): Just as the Minister of State's comments on the centrality of the importance of safety are very welcome, so, too, were his comments in response to an Adjournment debate on a pesticides tax, which I initiated a fortnight ago. Is not one of the most important arguments against such a tax, on which we encourage him to be robust, that it may inhibit innovation and the retirement of older, less acceptable chemicals in favour of more modern equivalents?

Mr. Rooker: The hon. Gentleman is perfectly correct. The idea of a pesticides tax, which is being examined, is seductive, although there are possible down sides, such as greater damage to the environment, the use of older pesticides, which have not been regulated sufficiently, and other misuse. Both my right hon. Friend and I will therefore be making the position quite clear when the appropriate time arises.

Ms Jean Corston (Bristol, East): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the consequences of recent health scares is that people no longer have an unquestioning faith in science? Does he also agree that one of the explanations for the huge increase in demand for organic food over recent years is growing concern about the long-term health and genetic consequences of ingesting pesticides?

Mr. Rooker: My hon. Friend is perfectly right, but let us not exaggerate. Although the Government are doubling aid to organic farmers—we want more to convert—and doubling research effort on organic production, we also check tens of thousands of samples of food every year for pesticide residue, under the control of the pesticides working party. We publish those results. Indeed, in the next tranche of publications, pesticide residues will be published by brand name. The Government's overall policy is aimed at a reduction in the use and volume of pesticides.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I thank the Minister not only for his reassuring words about organophosphates, but for meeting my all-party group, along with ministerial colleagues from other Departments, to discuss the review's progress. Will he look at the issue of warnings to users of pesticides, especially OPs? I am sure that he is aware that, in the 1980s, it was well known that they were extremely dangerous to handle in certain circumstances, yet the trade association, which goes by the extraordinary name of NOAH—the National Office of Animal Health—seems to have been resistant to the provision of any advice on labels. Will he particularly consider the damage to human health as a result of the lack of proper information?

Mr. Rooker: The hon. Gentleman touches on a serious and important point. We are not completely free agents on the matter, simply because the medicines to which he referred particularly come under the Control of Medicines Act 1968. Confidentiality is therefore greater than under other legislation. Since the matter was first raised with me, I have looked at it. The hon. Gentleman is correct to say that there were objections and an appeal some years ago about the nature of warnings on labels to users of pesticides and veterinary medicines, to which he referred, especially concerning people who shear sheep. The Department is actively considering the matter.

Competitiveness

3. **Dr. Ian Gibson** (Norwich, North): What discussions took place with the Department of Trade and Industry to ensure food production contributed to the DTI's policy document, "Building the Knowledge Driven Economy—Our Competitive Future". [67798]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): MAFF was consulted by DTI at various stages of the preparation of this White Paper.

Dr. Gibson: In my hon. Friend's discussions with the DTI on the setting up of the Foods Standards Agency, were there ever any disagreements between those who believe in wealth creation, entrepreneurship and innovation, and others who consider food safety and sound scientific advice more important?

Mr. Morley: I can assure my hon. Friend that, in the discussions, there was no disagreement about the need to develop a world-class business and a world-class reputation, and the need for the highest safety standards and quality controls. We have taken those initiatives forward by supporting initiatives from the grocery group to co-ordinate the development of food through all Government Departments and the food chain. One of those initiatives is based on best practice, which includes safety and quality.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): In the discussions that the Minister has just reported to the House, did he tell the Department of Trade and Industry that clause 23 of the proposed Food Standards Agency Bill would contain powers to enable his Ministry, if he were so minded, to levy charges on the entire food industry to cover all the costs of the agency, all the costs of food enforcement and other associated costs? Does he believe that those powers are necessary to secure a competitive food industry?

Mr. Morley: That was a collective decision. There will be consultations on the proposals for the Food Standards Agency, and all interested parties will be able to express their views on that and other issues.

Humanely Reared Meat

4. **Mr. Chris Mullin** (Sunderland, South): What discussions he has had with food retailers regarding the sale of humanely reared meat; and if he will make a statement. [67799]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): I regularly meet food retailers and ensure that they are aware of the high welfare standards of UK livestock production.

Mr. Mullin: Is my right hon. Friend satisfied that the major retailers are doing enough to promote humanely reared meat? Is he satisfied that they are not merely seeking to exploit the widespread desire for humanely reared meat by charging premium prices? Might retailers and the Government do more to promote humanely reared meat by mounting an aggressive advertising campaign designed to demonstrate to a wider audience the extreme cruelties of factory farming?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is on to a very strong point. I regularly meet the British Retail Consortium and others representing major and other retailers in the UK to discuss animal welfare. In animal welfare issues, I want to enlist the aid of the consumer. For consumers to help, they need a clear labelling scheme so that they can purchase animal welfare-friendly products. I am keen on promoting measures to ensure that.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): Does the Minister agree that the standards of animal husbandry and welfare in the United Kingdom are exceptionally high? Although the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) is on to a good point, does the Minister agree that the production of humanely reared meat, rather than extensively farmed meat, is a good selling point and will assist the export of meat from the UK? Will he assure the House that, when we are again able to enter export markets—when that happy day comes—that point will be strongly emphasised?

Mr. Brown: When we get British meat back on to international markets, our strongest selling point will be that British beef is among the safest in the world, and that it is reared to high animal welfare standards. I want to enlist the help of consumers in ensuring that we can get an animal welfare premium in the marketplace for the high livestock rearing standards that we have in this country. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his support for those objectives.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): While my right hon. Friend is in discussions with the retailers, will he discuss the plight of retailers in Chorley with regard to the proposed fees for small shopkeepers? Will he try to ensure that no tax is levied on small shopkeepers with premises of less than 10,000 sq ft and those belonging to chains of fewer than five shops?

Mr. Brown: The Government are consulting on the funding measures for the extra costs involved in the setting up of the Foods Standards Agency. The proposal, as the House knows, is for a flat rate levy of £90 a year. That is a charge of £1.73 per week. *[Interruption.]* I hear an hon. Member shout that that would be too much. I ask him what sum he thinks would be affordable.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): The Minister has gained a well-deserved reputation for listening to farmers. When will he do something concrete to help our meat producers? He has already taken away more money than he gave them in December. Why does he not use article 36 of the treaty, which allows him to preclude or restrict imports, on the grounds of the protection of health and life of humans and animals—ample opportunity for him to ensure that our standards of welfare, which he has already praised, are met by our imports, as well as by our own production?

Mr. Brown: As the hon. Gentleman is aware, we do, of course, make use of article 36 where there are grounds for doing so, but I cannot just use it gratuitously as a

protectionist measure, as the hon. Gentleman implies. The second point to his question is factually inaccurate. The aid package that I announced before Christmas did a substantial amount to help livestock producers, who I freely acknowledge are going through difficult times. The sums of money involved in the agrimonetary compensation under the hill livestock compensatory allowances are well in excess of the new charges, to which I think the hon. Gentleman is referring.

Genetically Modified Foods

5. **Judy Mallaber** (Amber Valley): What measures he is taking to ensure that consumers have adequate information on genetically modified foods. [67800]

6. **Ms Joan Walley** (Stoke-on-Trent, North): When he plans to meet the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes to discuss genetically modified food. [67801]

8. **Mr. Andrew Miller** (Ellesmere Port and Neston): What discussions he has had with the food industry in relation to genetically modified foods. [67803]

10. **Mr. Alan Simpson** (Nottingham, South): What discussions he has had about compulsory insurance schemes to cover genetically modified products. [67805]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Jeff Rooker): I am aware from on-going meetings with the food industry, and having met the ACNFP, that all GM foods marketed in the United Kingdom receive a thorough safety assessment and are required to be clearly labelled in accordance with EC legislation. I have not had any discussions about compulsory insurance schemes to cover GM products.

Judy Mallaber: I congratulate the Minister on tackling the labelling issue, but does he agree that that must be combined with ensuring that consumers have access to GM-free foods? Will he commit himself to ensuring the greatest possible openness on this and other food policy issues? Does he share the concern that I felt, when I visited the BSE inquiry with a constituent of mine whose son died of CJD, that the successive tragedies relating to the food industry must have some connection with the culture of secrecy that I saw displayed in that inquiry, which we saw with the previous Government?

Mr. Rooker: To take my hon. Friend's final point first, the culture, in terms of transparency and openness as opposed to secrecy, changed in May 1997. In the brief time that I had to reply to yesterday's debate, I gave examples of what we have done in that regard, including putting non-scientific lay members on all the advisory committees, publishing the minutes and the agendas of all the scientific committees, being open about labelling, and publishing the brand names of our chemical surveillance, veterinary medicine and pesticides residues programmes. The culture has changed dramatically. We will pursue with the EU the gaps in the labelling provision for GM foods relating to additives and flavourings, which I mentioned yesterday.

Ms Walley: My hon. Friend is doing a brilliant job and has the confidence of Labour Members in the work that he is doing. In relation to the ACNFP, is he aware that one particular batch of yellow Apache tortilla chips has been withdrawn because of suspected GM contamination? Does he intend, as part of future assessments, that the ACNFP will test for cross-pollination as part of its assessment for the authorisation of novel foods?

Mr. Rooker: Cross-pollination is a matter for the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' regulatory process under the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment. No crop is grown in Britain, whether genetically modified or otherwise, unless it has been approved by another Government Department, not this Ministry, and it is important that that separation continues.

I am not aware of the individual case to which my hon. Friend refers. Only four products have been approved in Britain and have gone through the regulatory process governed by the ACNFP, and they are the genetically modified tomato paste, the vegetarian cheese and the soya and maize.

Mr. Miller: Did my hon. Friend notice the contradiction from Conservative Members yesterday who originally resisted the labelling of GM foods and now seem to be on the offensive? Will my hon. Friend confirm that, in the programme to bring about greater transparency and choice for the consumer, so that the consumer can choose, he will ensure that his Department does not suggest to the consumer that there is risk? As he has just said, consumers have a high level of protection in the programme, and what we need to ensure is that the consumer has choice.

Mr. Rooker: The consumer has choice in two ways, and they are both necessary. This covers a point that I neglected to make to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke–on–Trent, North (Ms Walley): labelling is crucial, but, unless there is an alternative product, there cannot be any of the choice that is so crucial. On the initiative of the Government and of the Department, and as a result of discussions that we had a year ago, we published a list of 59 suppliers of GM-free maize and soya—they are mainly from the areas in which it is grown, such as Canada and the United States, although there are some suppliers in Holland—so that British food manufacturers and producers know where to go for GM-free supplies.

Obviously we require also, through the European Union, a de minimis level so that there is a percentage under which a product can be properly qualified as non-GM. False allegations are made by some food manufacturers, who claim that they are supplying GM-free food when their own contracts with suppliers allows up to 1 per cent. GM food.

Mr. Simpson: I congratulate the Minister on supporting the introduction of regulations in respect of GM products, which the Tories always blocked or refused to support. Will he consider three possible extensions of that? First, will he consider notifying retailers, whether they are in this place or any other, that they, too, will be included in the chain of product liability, in the way that retailers are in relation to beef on the bone? Will he also consider the possibility of attaching an obligation to have full public insurance indemnification at the point of product licensing?

Finally, will my hon. Friend assure the House that the Government will not enter into any mutual recognition agreement with the United States giving access to United Kingdom markets to GM products that have come through licensing processes less stringent than those that apply in the United Kingdom?

Mr. Rooker: The answer to my hon. Friend's last question is yes. Nothing will be put on sale in this country unless it has gone through the regulatory process that we carry out ourselves, in conjunction with our European Union partners. It simply will not be possible for a third country, such as the United States, to supply foods to member states of the EU—whether this country or any other—unless those foods have been approved by regulatory processes in this country and the EU.

All food retailers are liable for what they sell, under the Food Safety Act 1990. It has got to be safe; the liability is clear, and it is no different for GM foods. As I made clear in the debate yesterday, under common law, the firm holding the marketing consent for the GM crop can be held liable in law for any damages arising from, or ill effects attributed to, that crop. That will be extended in due course, under the product liability to primary agricultural producers under the European Commission Green Paper on food law.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): The Minister says that labelling is crucial in respect of GM products. He will remember that the second of the three options offered to him by the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee regarding beef on the bone was to label beef on the bone as potentially harmful to human beings. Why has he chosen the most extreme option offered to him by SEAC while simultaneously choosing to ignore the good advice given to him by English Nature, which said that GM foods may be harmful and therefore there should be a moratorium? Why does he believe SEAC while choosing to ignore English Nature?

Mr. Rooker: First, English Nature has not said anything whatever about GM foods being harmful. The answer to the rest of the question can wait until 12.30.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): I ask my question in all seriousness, because constituents are writing to me about this issue. In respect of the Minister's Department, the Government have suggested that they want to separate the producers of food from such Departments as the Department of Trade and Industry, which looks after industry retailers. How are the responsibilities of Lord Sainsbury being separated, because he is in charge of the Government's science policy? We rely on scientists to give proper advice to the Government, but he clearly has interests—which he has fully declared—in developing and selling GM foods. In respect of those responsibilities, can the Minister reassure the House that it will be clear to my constituents that the Government are being even-handed?

Mr. Rooker: I hope that I can assure the hon. Gentleman of that. My noble Friend has made his position absolutely clear, but he is in no way involved in the regulatory process in decisions relating to novel foods. Clearly, the Government—*[Interruption.]* No, because the Department—and, in due course, the Food Standards Agency—is responsible. We can completely separate sponsorship of the industry and producers from consumer interests.

The issues of biodiversity and biotechnology involve more than one Department. Obviously, the Department of Health has an interest, as has the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. We have established a new Cabinet Committee so that joined-up decisions can be made across government. As for food regulations, to which the question specifically relates, my noble Friend is in no way involved in that part of Government activity.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): Will the Minister note farmers' concern about the development of genetically modified crops and foods, which they believe is being driven by multinational chemical companies? Will he impose a five-year moratorium to ensure that public safety is not at risk?

Mr. Rooker: The best way in which I can answer that question—I am not playing with words—is by saying that there is a moratorium on a free-for-all in regard to the planting of such crops. That will not happen: farmers and companies will not be free to plant what they like, where they like. I made that clear yesterday, and I do so again now.

Under the guidelines that will be introduced under the final proposals of SCIMAC, the supply chain initiative on modified agricultural crops—when we have them—there will be controlled introduction and management of GM crops. The planting of each crop will depend on where the next is planted; it will not take place in isolation. It will not be possible for hundreds of acres to be planted willy-nilly, with no respect for what is being planted elsewhere—whether it is genetically modified, or an ordinary crop. I hope that I have reassured the hon. Gentleman that there will be considerable control over planting.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): Does the Minister understand what English Nature said? It said that the large-scale introduction of genetically modified crops into a small and crowded country such as Britain could have serious environmental consequences. In view of that advice, why will he not do as English Nature suggests, and allow the research for which the Government are paying to be completed before he starts authorising the commercial development of GM crops? It would be prudent to allow a short period during which the research could be studied, before deciding how safely the commercial release could take place.

Mr. Rooker: That is exactly what is being done. The hon. Gentleman is right: in this country, we grow our food in the countryside, whereas farmers in the United States grow their food on the prairies. In northern Europe—the rest of the European Union is virtually the same in this regard—we must be particularly vigilant in protecting the environment and biodiversity. That is why we have these controls. The same point was made by both the Minister for the Environment and me when we gave evidence to the Select Committee in the other place.

We have assessed English Nature's views. So far, we have been given no scientific reason why planting should not take place, provided that the final approvals are given.

There is currently no commercial planting of GM crops in this country, and, if it happens, it is unlikely to happen before late autumn this year.

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): I welcome my hon. Friend's assurances. Will he also assure us that the current labelling discussions will include the subject of animal feedstuffs? There are fears that there could be a repetition of the BSE problem, and that farmers will claim that they did not know what was in the feedstuffs. It is important for farmers to be able to reassure the ultimate consumers—ourselves—that what we are eating does not contain GM foods, should they choose to do so. Farmers must be able to choose whether to incorporate GMOs in animal feedstuffs.

Mr. Rooker: That is an important point. Back in 1992, a committee headed by Professor Lamming suggested the establishment of a special independent advisory committee dealing with animal feedstuffs. The previous Government accepted that recommendation, but did nothing about it. Such a committee is now being set up, and we hope to announce the appointment of a chairman before Easter.

If hon. Members refer to columns *691* and *692* of yesterday's *Hansard*, they will see that, in response to a question from the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), I published in full a background note that I had received concerning genetically modified crops. I am sure that the note will be of interest both to the House and to the companies mentioned in it.

Imported Meat

7. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): If he will make a statement about the powers he has to ban imported meat. [67802]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): The rules for intra-Community trade in meat and for imports from third countries are laid down in European Community legislation. Member states have powers to take interim protective measures in cases where a disease or other serious threat to public or animal health exists.

Mr. Swayne: I thank the Minister for that helpful reply. As my hon. Friend the Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) pointed out, under the treaty of Rome, the Minister has the power to ban imports on grounds of animal welfare and public health. Will he use those powers to alleviate the crisis in the pig industry, where producers are being undercut by meat from abroad that is reared in much less suitable circumstances and fed on feeds that would be illegal in this country?

Mr. Brown: I can use the powers under article 36 for the purposes that are set out. We use them, for example, to ban imports of specified risk materials from cattle, sheep and goats, but I cannot use the article as a general protectionist measure, as the hon. Gentleman wants me to do.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): This morning, we have had many questions about GMOs, but some of us think that an even greater threat to public health could come from artificial growth hormones that are injected into, or fed to, beef cattle. As I understand it, the product is already coming into this country and we are defenceless to stop it. What is the situation? Is it too late to stop that threat to public health?

Mr. Brown: Those matters are under consideration by the Commission. The European Union has a difference of view with the United States.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): What assessment has the Ministry made in view of the unfortunate industrial dispute that is taking place in the Meat Hygiene Service and this week's threat that the one-day stoppages or withdrawals may escalate to two or three days? What action does the Ministry propose to take to deal with the knock-on impact that that escalation could have on domestic demand for meat consumption, and the fact that all it will do is help our competitors to penetrate our market with imports that are all too often of an inferior quality?

Mr. Brown: The Meat Hygiene Service is set up as a next steps agency. I hope that the industrial dispute that is under way is resolved soon. As I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be the first to appreciate, the Government's priority is to ensure that the public are protected.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Why should we not, on principle, simply block the importation of pigmeat if it has been inhumanely produced?

Mr. Brown: Because this country has a huge vested interest in free trade, rather than in specific protectionist measures. I want British farmers to get that welfare premium in the marketplace, but, to achieve that, we must have clear labelling, the support of the British retail consortiums and other retailers and, above all, the support of United Kingdom consumers. We must encourage them to consume from welfare-friendly production systems, which will be a great support to the UK industry and, indeed, a great advance for animal welfare.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): Yes, the farmers are looking for a level playing field, but, to be able to export, farmers have to survive the winter. Does the Minister accept that many sheep farmers are finding it extremely difficult because the grass has stopped growing and they have no money with which to buy feed for their animals? Can he accelerate the hill livestock compensatory allowance package and the ewe premium package that he announced last November to bring the cash forward more quickly?

Mr. Brown: It is my intention that the enhanced HLCA payments that I announced last November are paid before the end of this financial year. I know that that will give some support for the hard-pressed sheep industry. The mechanism that I used—enhancing the HLCAs—was the only one that was open to me to give extra support to the sheep industry. The Government recognised the difficulties and responded with that one-off aid package.

Common Fisheries Policy

9. **Mr. Bob Blizzard** (Waveney): What meetings he has had recently with the representatives of the United Kingdom fishing industry to discuss reform of the common fisheries policy. [67804]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): I regularly meet members of the United Kingdom fishing industry when we discuss possible changes to the common fisheries policy.

Mr. Blizzard: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Representatives of the United Kingdom fishing industry will have studied the fisheries debate that took place in the Chamber shortly before Christmas. Can my hon. Friend say what the industry's reaction was to the Tory party policy of declaring national territorial waters and fighting some sort of fish war, rather like the previous beef war? Do the fishermen think that that is a realistic and sensible policy? What is my hon. Friend's assessment of that approach to the common fisheries policy?

Madam Speaker: Order. That is nothing to do with the Minister. The hon. Gentleman is asking about the Opposition's policy. It is not a relevant question for the Minister and I shall move on.

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): In the context of the negotiations about the common fisheries policy, can the Minister say what emphasis has been placed on the possibility of zonal management committees or councils, which would not go against the concept of the Hague preference, but would take account of the fragile nature of many of our coastal communities and the nature of the stocks in those areas?

Mr. Morley: That is a good point. We have been discussing ways of achieving a greater regional dimension within the common fisheries policy and a zonal approach is part of that. I am interested in those ideas, which are also formulated in a paper from the Scottish Fishermen's Federation and the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations. That approach to reforming the CFP and making it better and more practical is far better than any unrealistic policy of reneging on treaty obligations. That is not seen as a credible option by the fishermen and, when espoused by the Conservative party, it is not seen as a credible option by many of its members.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): There is a sustained discussion going on about the need to reform the common agricultural policy before European Union enlargement. What about reform of the common fisheries policy, which is just as important to our fishing communities as is reform of the CAP to our farming communities? When will we see a ban on industrial fishing? What guarantees can my hon. Friend give to our fishing communities that, with enlargement, our fishermen and their communities will be protected against the possible incursion of large fleets that are owned and operated by some of the applicant nations? Let us have a statement on that.

Mr. Morley: I recognise my hon. Friend's point about industrial fishing. At the next Fisheries Council, the United Kingdom will be advocating new proposals for seasonal closed areas from the Orkneys down to the Humber, which we hope will recognise the concerns about the impact of such fishing, based on the precautionary principle.

My hon. Friend is right to say that enlargement issues concern our fishing industry and our national interest. It is because of that that the principle of relative stability, which guarantees our quota share and that of other member states, is an important principle that we intend to protect within the negotiations on the CFP post-2002. That will protect our fleet from the effects of enlargement and the potential entry of large Polish fleets, for example.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): Is it not true that the Minister is nothing if not brazen? After all, before the election the Minister said that he was prepared to go to Amsterdam and say that there would be no progress on treaty negotiation unless quota hopping was dealt with. When he arrived, he threw in the towel the moment his plane touched down. Is the Minister seriously suggesting that our partners in Europe will willingly agree to our regaining control of our waters, which is what the fishing industry wants? Will he back us when we say that we should be as resolute in making and securing those demands as the noble Baroness Thatcher when she secured our original budget contribution? In a word, is the hon. Gentleman prepared to say on behalf of the British fishing industry that he is not prepared to take no for an answer?

Mr. Morley: First, may I correct the hon. Gentleman? Before the election, we said that we did not rule out any approach to deal with issues such as quota hoppers, for example. That was the line we followed. The previous Government had no support for any of the changes that they proposed. Now, after 18 years of supporting the common fisheries policy, during which time they could not resolve quota hopping, agreed to Spanish access to western waters, could not resolve fishing issues or take forward uniform enforcement across the European Union, they seem to be saying that, in some way, they could negotiate a withdrawal from the CFP and tear up treaties agreed by their Administration. It is not credible to do that. Neither is it credible to use the fishing industry as part of the agenda for a eurosceptic attack on the European Union.

Beef Cattle (Traceability Scheme)

11. **Mr. Michael Connarty** (Falkirk, East): What progress has been made in establishing a traceability scheme for beef cattle. [67806]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Jeff Rooker): The cattle tracing system, CTS, became operational on 28 September 1998, and records the births, movements and deaths of all animals registered on the system since that date. It also records details of cattle born since passports were introduced, in 1996. Eventually, it will record the death of those animals, although—as the old system was not working in the same as the new one does—it will not record their movements.

Mr. Connarty: I thank the Minister for that reply. He will know that SQBALR—it sounds like

squabbler—is not a board game based on the behaviour of parliamentarians but stands for the Scottish quality beef and lamb regime. Is he aware that the regime's representatives have told me that, as they go round Europe's trade fairs and food fairs, they are asked when people in Europe will also be able to eat Scottish beef? Can he imagine the crisis of conscience for people like me, who will go home this weekend and eat a succulent Scotch sirloin steak or a luscious piece of Scotch lamb, while realising that Europe's restaurateurs and bon viveurs are denied that pleasure? When will the traceability scheme allow us to sell Scottish beef and lamb to Europeans?

Mr. Rooker: So far, the new system has issued over 800,000 passports, at a rate of about 50,000 to 60,000 passports a week. I am not sure how many of the passports are being issued to SQBALRs, which will be quite young now, having been born and raised since last December. My hon. Friend asks how soon British beef will be exported. It will be exported as quickly as we can possibly receive approval of the practicalities of the date-based export scheme. We are doing all that we possibly can to prepare for the European Commission inspection—which we expect to be held in March, and certainly by early April. It will, of course, be up to the industry to regain its own markets, but recording cattle under the date-based scheme will not be the cause of any delay.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): Is the Minister aware of the growing concern in the beef industry about the apparently ever-receding date on which British beef exports are likely to resume? Will he tell the House how many abattoirs have come forward to offer themselves as dedicated abattoirs for British beef exports? Will he tell the House when he expects to be able to invite the European Commission to send its inspectors to the United Kingdom to examine the facilities through which British beef exports will start?

Mr. Rooker: In answer to the hon. Gentleman's first question, the number of abattoirs is less than the fingers on one hand. *[Interruption.]* I said less than the fingers on one hand.

Mr. James Paice (South–East Cambridgeshire): Does that mean zero?

Mr. Rooker: No, not zero. It is a small number—a very small number. They have offered themselves so that the European Commission can inspect the date-based scheme, on which we are consulting. As I said, as soon as we have the scheme in place, we shall invite the Commission to make its inspections. No date has ever been given on which beef off the bone—what the matter amounts to—will be exported. To deal with the thrust of the question from the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo), establishing the cattle tracing system will not be the cause of any delay. We are preparing, as quickly as possible, to invite the European Commission to inspect the abattoirs and the system's ability to trace cattle. As I said, we expect to do that in March or April. When beef leaves the United Kingdom will then be a matter for the industry and the markets.

Pig Industry

12. **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): If he will make a statement on the current profitability of the pig industry. [67807]

13. **Mr. Nigel Evans** (Ribble Valley): What action he plans to take to assist the pig industry. [67808]

14. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): What representations he has received about illegal pig subsidies to French and German producers; and if he will make a statement. [67809]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): I very much share the House's concern about the current problems facing the pig industry, and shall work constructively with our European Union partners to see what can be done. The Government will, however, continue to oppose the introduction of market-distorting state aids.

Mr. Heath: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his answer. Pig producers want only fair competition with our European competitors. What discussions has the hon. Gentleman had with our European competitors on the early introduction of their proposals on tether bans? Has he had any discussions on implementation of the directive before 2006? Will he also tell us why grants for conversion were available to Northern Ireland pig producers, whereas such grants were not available to any other producers in the United Kingdom?

Mr. Morley: The Government have consistently argued that although tethers are to be phased out in the European Union, there is no date to phase out sow stalls. I am pleased to report to the House that the European Science and Veterinary Committee has recently published a report that backs our argument that there are strong welfare grounds for phasing out tethers across the European Union. That will be one of our priorities in the negotiations.

Mr. Evans: The Minister has spoken about his belief in free trade, but what about his belief in fair trade? We have imposed certain obligations on our pig farmers, but some imported pigmeat does not meet those high standards. We do not want special treatment for pig farmers, we want equal treatment. When will he bring that about?

Mr. Morley: Equal treatment is a serious issue, but the phasing out of sow stalls was agreed eight years ago. The industry has had eight years to prepare for it. There are costs associated with meat and bone meal controls that result from our problem with BSE, for which the previous Administration must take responsibility. We should not apologise for the United Kingdom's high welfare and quality standards in the pig sector. We are doing all that we can to ensure that they are a marketing advantage for retailers and caterers, as they should be, and that our pig industry benefits.

Miss McIntosh: Has the Minister received any specific representations about illegal pig subsidies in France and

Germany? Does he agree with me and with the National Farmers Union that the present procedure of applying to the European Court of Justice is too slow? Will he propose a procedure for an immediate ban on subsidies which the Commission rules illegal or unfair and press for an interim interdict or injunction to stop the damage to the British pig farming industry?

Mr. Morley: I can certainly assure the hon. Lady that we shall take immediate action by complaining to the Commission. We have done that over the proposed German and French state aid. The German proposals have been withdrawn and the French proposals have been stopped by the Commission.

ATTORNEY–GENERAL

The Attorney–General was asked—

Pro Bono Work

30. **Mr. Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South): What encouragement he is giving to Government lawyers to do pro bono work. [67827]

The Solicitor–General (Mr. Ross Cranston): My right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney-General and I are very supportive of pro bono work. My right hon. and learned Friend is a member of the advisory board of the Bar's pro bono unit and we have both attended functions to foster the work of the solicitors pro bono group. We are also keen to encourage Government lawyers who wish to participate in pro bono work, such as assisting at legal advice centres or citizens advice bureaux. Those in charge of the Government legal service have looked at the issue at the request of my right hon. and learned Friend and have concluded that it is possible to encourage Government lawyers to participate in pro bono work.

Mr. Chapman: Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that the attitude of those who commit themselves to pro bono work is the same as that of the Government in the promotion of a community legal service? What specific measures are being taken to put that important service in place and what is the timetable?

The Solicitor–General: My hon. Friend knows that the Access to Justice Bill is currently in the other place. We are hoping that it will be speedily dealt with there and then come here. He is right to say that the same principles underlie that Bill and our encouragement of pro bono work. We do not regard the encouragement of pro bono work as a substitute for the public provision of legal services. It is additional to the public support for access to justice that the Bill will provide.

Sentencing

31. **Mr. Andrew Mackinlay** (Thurrock): On how many occasions he has sought leave to appeal against over-lenient sentences since 1 May 1997; and if he will make a statement. [67828]

The Attorney-General (Mr. John Morris): Since 1 May 1997, leave has been sought in respect of 148 offenders. Of those, 97 applications have been heard, leave was granted in 93 cases and the sentence was increased in 80, which is 82.5 per cent. of the references that have been heard.

Mr. Mackinlay: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for that information. I realise that the Labour manifesto cannot be implemented in its entirety at a stroke, but when will he be able to fulfil Labour's commitment to extend the powers of the Attorney-General to refer unduly lenient sentences to the Court of Appeal? Will he confirm that it can be done by order, without primary legislation, particularly against the backdrop of increasing numbers of victims of crime demanding greater justice in relation to dangerous driving, which I understand cannot yet be referred under the provisions of the Criminal Justice Act 1988?

The Attorney–General: I am well aware of the manifesto commitment to extend unduly lenient sentences. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I are actively considering how best to take that forward. I also confirm that a sentence can be extended by order. It is only when one seeks to restructure the original scheme that one requires primary legislation. I share my hon. Friend's concern, which is manifest in all parts of the House, about sentences for causing death by dangerous driving. My hon. Friend is not right, however, as sentences can be extended.

Mr. Mackinlay: However, sentences relating to dangerous driving cannot be referred, so I was right.

The Attorney–General: Yes. Causing death by dangerous driving is within the scheduled list. The matter undoubtedly causes concern and over the years a large number of cases involving dangerous driving causing death have been referred.

Crown Prosecution Service

32. **Mr. Kerry Pollard** (St. Albans): What initiatives are being taken forward in order to improve co–operation between the CPS and the police. [67829]

The Attorney–General: I welcome my hon. Friend's recent visit to the Hertfordshire branch of the CPS. At a local level, police and the CPS are using joint performance management techniques to improve the timeliness and the quality of police files and CPS review decisions. At pilot sites, the police and the CPS are working closely together testing the recommendations in the Narey report on reducing delay in the criminal justice system. At a national level, a working group jointly chaired by the CPS and the Association of Chief Police Officers is considering the Glidewell recommendations on the establishment of joint police-CPS criminal justice units.

Mr. Pollard: I am pleased that the Attorney-General mentioned the Glidewell proposals for joint police-CPS criminal justice units. Does he agree that they will make an important contribution to co-operation between the police and the CPS? Better co-operation means that less

goes wrong and that, should there be a problem, the police and the CPS do not blame each other. What progress has been made on those matters?

The Attorney-General: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend that one side blaming the other without foundation is wrong and impedes progress. However, I am sure that the House will agree that my hon. Friend is entirely right to emphasise the importance of co-operation between the police and the CPS. The need for such co-operation has underpinned the Government's approach from the outset, and in particular the decision to restructure the CPS into 42 areas. As for criminal justice units, the issue is being pursued by a working group jointly chaired by the CPS and ACPO. It has yet to report, but I am pleased to tell the House that the work has been taken forward in a positive and constructive manner and I am optimistic that we shall be able to build on the Glidewell proposals in a manner that is practical and consistent with the different contributions that the police and the CPS make to the overall process.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): The question by the hon. Member for St. Albans (Mr. Pollard) highlights the link between the CPS and the police, but I believe that it misses the crucial point. The Access to Justice Bill greatly extends the rights of audience of CPS lawyers. As a result, they will take some of the most important cases and come under immense pressure. What measures are the Government taking, other than those in the Bill—particularly in clause 36—to ensure the independence of the CPS not just from the police but from many other Executive agencies?

The Attorney-General: I am glad to assure the hon. Gentleman about the independence of the CPS, which I value as much as he does. That independence exists by statute, and there was nothing in the Glidewell proposals to undermine that. I do not believe that our proposals in the Access to Justice Bill will undermine them in any way. Indeed, there has never been any suggestion in the summary courts that prosecutors are tainted by any lack of independence.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Is my right hon. and learned Friend aware of the Narey pilot in Croydon? All cases go to court within three days, and on 75 per cent. of occasions people who plead guilty are dealt with in one day. Across the board, the average case takes only two months, where previously it took many, and indictable cases go straight to Crown court. Now that the police and the CPS work together instead of blaming each other, the system is much better and people know that.

The Attorney-General: I am glad to hear my hon. Friend's detailed report of his investigations into what happens in Croydon. Five similar pilot schemes are under way—in Tyneside, Blackburn and Burnley, Northamptonshire, north Staffordshire and north Wales. The independent consultancy firm Ernst and Young is well known to the House and it has been commissioned to evaluate the results, and will make its final report in July. That report will cover all the initiatives that have been taken, with the exception of indictable-only provisions. Conclusions will be reached only when that report is received, but early indications confirm what my hon. Friend has discovered—that the initiatives have improved co-operation between the CPS and the police. We shall carry on the good work.

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North–East Bedfordshire): I agree that, if the work is good, it should be carried on. However, there are some signs that police co-operation—even at ACPO level—with the Director of Public Prosecutions and the CPS, is not as constructive and forward-looking as the Attorney-General's answer implied.

The problem is very important, given that the number of civilians employed by the police is greater than the total staff of the CPS. At present, only 50 per cent. of the cases that come forward from the police are either timely or accurate. Will the Attorney-General assure the House that the civilians in the crime support units and the CPS, with the assistance of chief constables, are really preparing to get together, so that there will be an improvement in the coming months?

The Attorney–General: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is absolutely right to say that there is a need for further improvement. That is what the initiative is all about. Although different constituencies are involved—the CPS and the police—we hope that they will unite as part of the criminal justice system. Hence, to ensure joint ownership of further initiatives to that end, the pilot schemes have been chaired jointly by the police and the CPS. I assure the House that the early indications suggest that we can make progress towards a unified approach.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman is also right to say that some files are not up to standard and are not being delivered on a timely basis. I know that, when he was Attorney-General, he sought to make an improvement in that. We intend to continue that very important work to ensure that criminals are brought to justice more speedily, because the public want to be satisfied that public money is spent properly.

Prosecutions (Juveniles)

33. **Mr. Ian Bruce** (South Dorset): If he will make a statement on progress on the Government's fast-track prosecution of juveniles. [67831]

The Solicitor-General: The Government are committed to reduce by half—from 142 days to 71—the average time taken to deal with persistent young offenders. More than 150 youth court areas have fast-tracking schemes in operation, covering almost half the courts in England and Wales. Before May 1997, only eight youth court areas were covered. Tough performance targets have been set for all stages of criminal proceedings, apart from trial. Measures in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, including statutory time limits, should help to ensure that the targets are met.

Mr. Bruce: I thank the hon. and learned Gentleman for that reply, but he has not answered my question. We want a progress report on whether the time taken for juveniles to be prosecuted is being reduced. The Home Secretary, when in opposition, touched a nerve, and received an enthusiastic welcome, when he said that he would reduce the time it took for young offenders to be prosecuted. It is important to do so, because we all know that they go out committing other offences during the delays in their

prosecutions. The hon. and learned Gentleman would win our support if he got on with doing something. When will we see some real results?

The Solicitor-General: I am pleased to have the hon. Gentleman's support. When we came into office, we inherited an appalling mess. It took four and a half months before persistent young offenders were dealt with. In some areas, good progress has been made. In north Hampshire, for example, the time taken is down to 61 days from four and half months, but I do not pretend that the targets will all be achieved overnight.

I welcome the hon. Gentleman's interest, and I hope that he will visit the CPS and other parts of the court system in his area, as my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies) has in his. North Dorset has adopted performance targets; the hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) should encourage those who work in the system.

Mr. David Lock (Wyre Forest): Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that we will make progress only by setting tough performance targets? The House would wish to know precisely what targets are being set for youth courts so that hon. Members can judge precisely what those who operate the system on the ground are expected to do, and so that the public may have confidence that persistent young offenders will be brought quickly before the courts, and disposed of rather than having their cases endlessly adjourned.

The Solicitor-General: I thank my hon. Friend for his interest. Late last year, non-statutory performance targets were adopted. For youth courts those targets are: from arrest to charge—two days; charge to first appearance—seven days; first appearance to start of trial—28 days; verdict to sentence—14 days. As I said earlier, we are trying to reduce the overall average to 71 days from the four and a half month one that we inherited. We are making good progress.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Madam Speaker: We return now to Question 1.

The Minister was asked—

Beef on the Bone

1. **Mr. Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South): What plans he has to lift the ban on beef on the bone following the report from the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee; and if he will make a statement. [67796]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): The chief medical officer, Professor Liam Donaldson, submitted advice to me and to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health on 18 January. His advice follows the latest scientific assessment of the public health risk from beef bones by the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee, which was published on 30 November 1998. SEAC concluded that the risk from infectivity in bone marrow and dorsal root ganglia is now less than it was 12 months ago. That assessment reflected the continued decline in the number of bovine spongiform encephalopathy cases.

The CMO has concluded that a public health intervention now to lift the Beef Bones Regulations 1997 would allow that element of the food hazard that was originally eliminated—albeit reduced in magnitude—to pose a renewed, though very small, risk. He therefore recommends that, in line with the Government's risk reduction strategy on BSE, the existing controls in the regulations should continue for the time being.

Given the anticipated further decline in the number of BSE-infected cattle during 1999, the chief medical officer has recommended that the controls should be reviewed six months on from 1 February 1999, with particular attention paid to a number of points that he has specified in his advice. He has also asked that, during 1999, a full analysis of the age structure of new cases of BSE be conducted, the success of control measures be audited and new predictions of the incidence of the disease be made. He has also made commitments to continue work on providing estimates of risk in terms that will allow greater public understanding of the level of risk compared with other potential hazards and to ensure that new cases of new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease continue to be carefully monitored.

The Government welcome the CMO's memorandum. We accept all his recommendations. As we have made clear throughout, the beef bones controls were put in place to protect public health from the risk of nvCJD, and will be lifted only in the light of scientific and medical advice. It is encouraging that the CMO sees grounds for hoping that the situation will improve. If we can, consistent with a further assessment of the medical and scientific evidence, we will lift the ban after the review recommended by the CMO in six months.

I acknowledge that the delay in lifting the controls will greatly disappoint many in the food and farming industry and many would-be consumers, but the need to protect public health and retain confidence in beef and beef products remains the Government's paramount concern. My colleagues and I continue to expect that the beef bones regulations will be complied with fully and enforced. Copies of the CMO's memorandum and recommendations are being placed in the Libraries of the House and made widely available, including on the Ministry's internet site.

Mr. Chapman: I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. Does he agree that while there is concern among consumers and, of course, beef farmers, the way forward must be to seek the complete eradication of BSE? Where doubt exists, positive and firm action must be taken. Does he agree that had it not been for the inactivity, secrecy and negligence of the previous Government, we would not face this dilemma? Does he further agree that our first priority is the protection of the consumer, in this instance and in the publication of the Food Standards Agency Bill? That is all in stark contrast to the attitude of the Conservative party.

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is right. The protection of the public must come first in these matters. He is also right to remind the House of the attitudes that got us into this mess in the first place.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): Is the Minister aware that there will be huge disappointment at this

announcement not only among beef farmers who are already struggling but among consumers who continue to be denied the chance to choose their own menus? This is a big setback for an industry that is fighting to regain market confidence. Does he realise that it is also a setback for him personally after all the hints that he has dropped in the past few weeks about lifting the ban? After a six-month struggle to prove that he is different from his unlamented predecessor, he has failed the first real test.

Only this morning, the House was told that the Government are willing to ignore the warnings of English Nature about the environmental risks that may be associated with the hasty large-scale commercial release of genetically modified crops. Why will the Government not publish the CMO's advice and allow consumers to decide for themselves whether to eat beef on the bone? Will the right hon. Gentleman tell the House the statistical risk of dying from eating beef on the bone and say how it compares with the risks of smoking, an activity where some individual choice is still permitted?

Mr. Brown: The risk is very small, but it is nevertheless there. The chief medical officer's advice is very clear indeed. The hon. Gentleman mentioned consumer choice, but there would be no consumer choice in a restaurant where beef on the bone had been used in the preparation of stew, gravy, or food of that sort. English Nature is not the chief medical officer. It would be wrong to set the science and the medical advice to one side and make a political decision rather than one based on professional advice. Of course I want to lift the ban as soon as I can properly do so, but the chief medical officer has made it absolutely clear to me—in words that brook no misunderstanding whatsoever—that that time is not now.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): How many people have died from new variant CJD? Does the Minister agree that it is a deadly disease and that the Government are right to be safe rather than sorry? One of my constituents died from CJD and I had to face the family of that constituent. We must ensure that this Government do not get the same reputation as the previous one, who protected the farmers but forgot to protect the public. I am sorry that the ban cannot be lifted yet, but it is better for the consumer and for the farmer to ensure that beef on the bone is safe before the ban is lifted.

Mr. Brown: Like every other member of the Government, I am determined that we will not get the same reputation as the previous one. I understand that 35 people have now died from the new variant of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, but I am afraid that it is a statistical certainty that more will follow. We are not yet sure of the profile of the disease, so it is absolutely right to err—if err we do—on the precautionary side.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): Will the Minister concede that he and the agriculture and wider food industries are today the victims of some premature and unfortunate spinning that occurred on his behalf and in his name only last weekend? There is a crisis in morale in British agriculture, which was given something of a fillip by the suggestion that the Minister would be able to make a positive statement today rather than announcing a six-month delay. The down side in terms of morale will thus be all the more acute.

Given that we have always disagreed about the ban on beef on the bone, does not the rather unhappy position in which the Minister finds himself today underscore the lack of wisdom shown by his predecessor in not taking the other option that SEAC offered: to publish the quantifiable risk—which is statistically minute—treat the citizens of this country like adults, and allow them to make their own mature decisions as to the risks? Should the Minister not revisit that option as a matter of urgency?

Will the right hon. Gentleman also address the issue of the over-30-months scheme, as today's statement has another worrying implication? As from this month, there should be nothing in the food chain in this country that represents a quantifiable risk. However, if the chief medical officer is offering this advice—which the Government feel compelled to accept—what implications does that have for the credibility of the OTMS?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman has the last point wrong. The issue is not the over-30-months scheme but maternal transmission and the very small—but still present—risk that that could cause infectivity in the bone element and in the material clinging to the bone. The hon. Gentleman asked about my desire to lift the ban as soon as I can. As soon as it is the responsible thing to do, I will lift the ban on beef on the bone. However, the advice that I have received from the chief medical officer brooks no misunderstanding whatsoever. In advice to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and me, the chief medical officer said:

> "I recommend, that there should be no reintroduction into the human food chain of that proportion of dorsal root ganglia, as well as bone marrow, eliminated through the Beef Bones Regulations for the time being. To do so would mean that this pool of tissue from the small number of animals incubating BSE at the time of their slaughter could be eaten inadvertently during a meal, in meat trimmed off the bone or hidden in stocks, gravy and other products with a beef bone base and ingested without the person realising it."

The hon. Gentleman and other Opposition Members invite me to reject that advice, but I feel that I cannot do so.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): I respect the eating habits of the large majority of British people, but, as a matter of interest, will my right hon. Friend tell me whether any food that vegetarians eat has ever caused anything like the problem that now confronts him and has confronted previous Ministers?

Mr. Brown: Not so far as I am aware.

Sir Brian Mawhinney (North–West Cambridgeshire): May I invite the Minister to be less coy? My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) asked him to tell us the quantifiable risk, and he answered that that risk was very small—but what is it? Is it one in however many millions, or does the Minister not know?

Mr. Brown: The CMO and SEAC have not quantified the risk in mathematical terms. The phrase they have used is "very small".

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke–on–Trent, North): However great the disappointment at the further delay to the lifting of the ban is, I congratulate my right hon. Friend on today's decision. May I refer him to another

recommendation made by SEAC in November in respect of concern about operations in rendering plants? Will he review current legislation so that the practice of spreading liquid condensate on grazing pasture can be prevented and the substance classified, not as a fertiliser, but as a special waste?

Mr. Brown: Local authorities already have powers to act in that respect.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): Does the right hon. Gentleman not recall that the previous advice was based on a statistical figure of approximately one in a billion? Has he not told the House today that the advice he has now received says that the risk is less now than it was then? Does he not appreciate that, if he waits for the CMO to tell him that there is no risk whatsoever before lifting the ban, he will wait in vain, because the CMO can never give such advice? The issue requires ministerial leadership. The House was encouraged by the right hon. Gentleman's remarks to understand that he would give that leadership as the new Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. Does he realise what a serious setback today's decision is, both for the industry, and for consumers?

Mr. Brown: No, I do not accept that. The real setback for the industry would be if I were to ignore the advice of the CMO and create uncertainty about the safety of beef products in restaurants and in the retail marketplace. That would be an irresponsible thing to do. I accept the right hon. Gentleman's remarks about the SEAC report, but the CMO did not phrase his advice to me in a way that defines a mathematical average—

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): He did.

Mr. Brown: The right hon. Gentleman should keep quiet and listen instead of chirping away from the Back Benches.

I accept what has been said about the SEAC report, but the CMO has not framed his advice in the form sought by the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King), which is a mathematical formula that has "acceptable" at one end and "unacceptable" at the other. The CMO has said starkly that the risk is very small but that he is not able to recommend a lifting of the regulations now. That advice is not ambiguous: he does not recommend a lifting of the regulations now, but believes that it would be proper to return to the matter in six months' time.

Dr. George Turner (North–West Norfolk): My right hon. Friend will know that he will face some disappointed farmers on his visit to my constituency tomorrow. However, does he agree that the worst possible advice to give the industry is that it should follow the lead of the Conservatives, who appear to want put political argument ahead of public safety? This sector is but a small financial proportion of the entire industry, but there is a considerable danger that farming as a whole will become associated with disregarding safety for financial gain. The worst possible action is to urge the Minister to overturn clear medical advice.

Mr. Brown: I am looking forward to my return visit to Norfolk tomorrow. I am willing to discuss those matters with farmers, but by far and away the worst thing that I could do for the beef market would be to create new uncertainty about whether the product is safe. By the time we have come through the BSE crisis our country will have spent over £4 billion of taxpayers' money, supplemented to a small degree by resources from the European Union, to ensure the safety of the public. It would be wrong of me, as a Minister of the Crown, to undermine public protection. Public safety must come first.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): Since this is a Government who say that they believe in joined-up thinking, how do they reconcile the continued ban on beef on the bone with their continued promotion of the sale of duty-free cigarettes?

Mr. Brown: It is perfectly possible to exercise choice over the consumption of cigarettes, and the chief medical officer's warnings about cigarettes are printed on the packet. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Brown: I wish that Conservative Members would listen. I have just read to the House the chief medical officer's advice, which makes it absolutely clear that it is not certain in all circumstances that consumers of beef products would be able to exercise that choice. Reintroduction of uncertainty is one of the points that the chief medical officer properly warns against. Whatever the arguments about smoking, the fact is that nvCJD is invariably fatal.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): Will my right hon. Friend assure me that research continues into the possible infectivity of bone marrow? We already know of the problems with the dorsal root ganglia, but there has been no assurance yet about bone marrow. That needs to be worked out before any change in policy is made.

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is on to a good point. A substantial research programme into precisely that matter is now under way.

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): Does the Minister agree that the unfortunate and regrettable decision announced today will give our European partners a further excuse to delay the lifting of the beef ban and the introduction of the date-based scheme?

Mr. Brown: I hope that it will not, for two reasons. First, our European partners are reassured by the public protection measures in this country. It would be irresponsible of me to start dismantling them, particularly against the advice of the chief medical officer. Secondly, the date-based export scheme is for deboned beef, so the issue of bones in beef is not bound up with the resumption of exports from the rest of the United Kingdom; and the same is true for the certified herd scheme in Northern Ireland. I say again to the hon. Gentleman that I very much enjoyed the Irish beef that I ate in Bologna recently when I met the Italian Minister.

Business of the House

12.53 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): Will the Leader of the House tell us the business for next week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 8 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Social Security Contributions (Transfer of Functions, etc) Bill.*[Lords]*.

TUESDAY 9 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Employment Relations Bill.

WEDNESDAY 10 FEBRUARY—Until 2 o'clock there will be debates on the motion for the Adjournment of the House.

Until about 7 o'clock, consideration in Committee of the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill.

Remaining stages of the Water Industry Bill.

THURSDAY 11 FEBRUARY—Until 4 o'clock, motions on the Welsh Revenue Support Grant Reports.

Motions on the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order and the Housing Support Grant (Scotland) Order.

Motions on the Scotland Act 1998 (Transitional and Transitory Provisions) (Finance) Order and the Scotland Act 1998 (Transitional and Transitory Provisions) (Appropriations) Order.

FRIDAY 12 FEBRUARY—The House will not be sitting. The provisional business for the following week will be as follows:

MONDAY 15 FEBRUARY—Consideration in Committee of the House of Lords Bill [1st Allotted Day].

TUESDAY 16 FEBRUARY—Consideration in Committee of the House of Lords Bill [2nd Allotted Day].

Madam Speaker, the House will wish to be reminded that, subject to the progress of business, it is proposed that the House will rise on Tuesday 16 February at the close of business until Monday 22 February. The business for that week will be announced in my next business statement but will include:

MONDAY 22 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of a Government Bill.

Sir George Young: The House is grateful to the right hon. Lady for the announcement of next week's business, and for an indication of business for the week thereafter. Will she ensure that, next week, the Chancellor will do what she and every other Cabinet Minister has done: answer written questions on details of his use of Royal Air Force and chartered aircraft? Does she understand that his continued refusal to do so, far from diminishing embarrassment to the Government, is increasing it—quite apart from any discourtesy to the House?

Will the Government announce next week the members of the royal commission on the House of Lords, which the right hon. Lady first trailed some four months ago? The commission already faces a very tight timetable, and it will be made more difficult if the commissioners cannot start because they have not been appointed. In light of the recognition by the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office that some Members were unable to participate in the Second Reading of the House of Lords Bill earlier this week, may we have a debate in Government time on the broader issues raised by the White Paper?

Against the background of the exchange at Agriculture questions, may we have a debate very soon on the growing confusion in the Government's approach to food safety and consumer protection? On some issues, they overrule the independent advice that they are given, while on others, they say that they must abide by it.

In the light of the deteriorating situation in Northern Ireland, could we have a statement next week by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland?

Is the Leader of the House able to shed any light on arrangements for Easter and Whitsun, so that Members and staff of the House can make appropriate plans?

Mrs. Beckett: On the issue of the Chancellor answering written questions on travel costs, I must freely admit at once that I am not aware of ever having been asked such questions. Perhaps my memory is at fault. The Chancellor and other Treasury Ministers gave answers to questions on ministerial travel on 27 October 1997, 11 December 1997, 15 January 1998, 11 March 1998, 19 November 1998, 27 November 1998, 18 January 1999 and 26 January 1999—and those are only the answers that we can trace. The suggestion that the Chancellor has been reluctant to give answers does not stand. Despite the fact that the Opposition spent more money in government on perfectly proper ministerial travel than this Government, they are trying to make mischief and waste Ministers' time. [HON. MEMBERS: "Over 18 years."] I am not talking about 18 years; I am talking about two years.

The right hon. Member for North–West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) asked me when we hope to announce the names of members of the royal commission. I hope to do so in the near future, and certainly before the House of Lords Bill goes into Committee. I hope that that will be of assistance to him.

I cannot undertake to find time for a debate on the White Paper. We have already had—perfectly properly—two days on the Floor of the House on Second Reading of the House of Lords Bill, and all the Committee stage will be taken on the Floor of the House, too. I hope and expect that every hon. Member who wishes to contribute to the debate on the matter will be able to do so.

The right hon. Gentleman asked for a debate on food safety, on the grounds that there is confusion in the Government's stance. I do not accept that. I say to him, with respect, that if the previous Government had taken as robust an attitude to public safety as this Government, we would not now be needing to have exchanges such as those we had a few moments ago.

The right hon. Gentleman asked for a statement on the situation in Northern Ireland. Of course, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland keeps matters under review, and such can be raised through the usual channels, if that is thought to be necessary.

The right hon. Gentleman asked finally whether, for the benefit of the House, I can give any indication of the dates of the Easter recess. I cannot give him specific dates, although I anticipate that the Easter recess will include the week commencing Monday 5 April; indeed—as I know that it concerns the efficient handling of Members'

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affairs—may I say that I also anticipate that the Whitsun recess will include the week commencing Monday 31 May? I hope that that is of assistance to the House.

Mr. Ted Rowlands (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney): Will my right hon. Friend assure us that we will have our traditional annual Welsh day debate this month? It could be our last one.

Mrs. Beckett: With great respect to my hon. Friend, I am positive that he alone will make sure that this year's Welsh debate is not our last. I have taken heed of his request.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Will the Leader of the House give urgent consideration to the possibility of a debate in Government time on BSE? I do not know whether the right hon. Lady was in the House a few minutes ago when the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food made his statement. If she was, she will have noted that that the right hon. Gentleman made a remarkable admission by saying that the chief medical officer is effectively giving credibility to the idea that BSE can be communicated from cow to calf—the so-called maternal transmission theory, which has been discounted in the past.

If that means that cattle born since all infected feed was removed from the food chain in August 1996—30 months ago—could have contracted the disease through maternal transmission, that is a new development of alarming proportions for our agriculture industry, as it brings into question the date-based export scheme, and means that the export ban could remain in place. The Minister's admission is a dramatic development, and it is extremely important that the House is given an opportunity to debate it urgently.

Will the Leader of the House read the report in the *Daily Express* today, which suggests that in the past BSE information has been shredded in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and that therefore the Phillips inquiry cannot examine all the factors that have been involved?

Mrs. Beckett: I did not hear the part of my right hon. Friend's reply to which the hon. Gentleman alludes, although I did hear some of what my right hon. Friend said. I will draw the hon. Gentleman's concerns to his attention. I cannot at this moment undertake to find time for the debate that the hon. Gentleman seeks, but he will no doubt be able to follow up on the issues that he has raised.

The hon. Gentleman further asks me to give attention to the report in the *Daily Express*. I always give attention to what is reported in the *Daily Express* and other newspapers. I understand that there is no evidence that any BSE files have been shredded. The Prime Minister has asked that officials provide the inquiry with all assistance, and they are, indeed, doing so.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): Has my right hon. Friend read the brilliant but very disturbing article by James Pringle in *The Times* today about the catastrophe in North Korea? Given the picture that he draws of 3 million out of 20 million people having already died; of children suffering; of mothers offering their babies to people in the forlorn hope that somebody else may look after them; of women refusing to have children because they know that milk and food would not be available; and of stagnant industry, does my right hon. Friend agree that the House would be ready to support my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development in ensuring that food goes to the stomachs of the children, women and men who are suffering from hunger, and not to the regime or the armed forces? Will she encourage my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary to seek any diplomatic initiative that he considers appropriate, particularly with South Korea and China, in order to find a speedy solution to this dreadful problem?

Madam Speaker: Is the right hon. Gentleman seeking a debate in the next two weeks on that issue? Perhaps he would make that clear.

Mr. Clarke: I hope that it may be possible, Madam Speaker.

Mrs. Beckett: I know of the great interest that my right hon. Friend takes in such matters and the great concern that he has always shown. I am not sure whether the matter was raised during questions to the Secretary of State for International Development yesterday, but I will undertake to draw his concerns to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary.

I know that the House will share the concern expressed by my right hon. Friend. He will know that it is the Government's aim to make sure that all the assistance and support that we give goes to the people who need it.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): As the Member representing Smithfields, may I reinforce the request for a debate on BSE from my right hon. Friend the Member for North–West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) and the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), given the consternation that will have been created in the industry by the contrast between privately expressed, highly optimistic departmental spin, and the contrasting disappointing reality today?

Mrs. Beckett: I have heard the right hon. Gentleman. I understand the disappointment of hon. Members who are concerned about the matter. I understand that only some 4 per cent. of our consumption in recent times has been of beef on the bone. But, of course, I understand the concern that is expressed at anything that causes continued anxiety. I shall certainly undertake to take the right hon. Gentleman's concerns, too, into account.

Mr. Lawrence Cunliffe (Leigh): Has my right hon. Friend seen early-day motion 102?

[That this House condemns the appalling and deplorable trade practice at establishments which breed cats and kittens for the vivisection industry and sell them to laboratories world-wide; notes that some of these kittens are only six weeks old when they are subjected to horrific experiments; and calls upon the Home Secretary to investigate this cruel trade with a view to banning these barbaric practices which put profit before humanity.]

Many of those animals are subject to horrific experiments. If my right hon. Friend cannot arrange a debate on that, will she now join me in condemning those establishments that put profit before humanity?

Mrs. Beckett: There is concern on both sides of the House about the use of animals in experiments and other scientific procedures—a matter on which my hon. Friend has long and staunchly campaigned. Any hon. Member would condemn any suggestion of animals being treated cruelly or inadequately cared for, whether for profit or in any other circumstances. The Government endeavour to ensure that there is stringent inspection of such establishments so that such things do not happen.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): May we have an urgent debate on Britain's long-standing traditions of religious tolerance and freedom of speech? Would that not give the House an opportunity to reaffirm the fact that, in Britain, for as long as anyone can remember, people have been free to express their religious views, however eccentric, cranky—or even, occasionally, distasteful—they may appear to the majority of people? May we, therefore, reaffirm the principle that, in Britain, protection is provided from persecution in respect of those things, particularly by the Prime Minister?

Mrs. Beckett: I think all hon. Members support religious tolerance and freedom of speech, including the Prime Minister. I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman extends his views to the treatment in the press of reports of the schooling of the Prime Minister's daughter, which itself is based on a religious decision.

Ms Margaret Moran (Luton, South): Will my right hon. Friend allow time during the next two weeks for a debate on domestic violence, an important matter which the British Medical Association estimates affects the lives of one in four women in Britain? In my constituency in Luton tonight, it is estimated that the police will be called out to no fewer than six incidents of domestic violence involving women being beaten. Will she allow time for such an important debate and join me in congratulating Women's Aid on its launch today of a website, as another valuable tool for giving advice to women who are victims of that cruel and cowardly crime?

Mrs. Beckett: That is an issue in which my hon. Friend has taken great interest and about which she has shown concern, and I share her welcome for anything that can help to give the right kind of advice and support. I understand that a cross-Government response, drawing in the views of the Home Office, the Lord Chancellor's Department and my right hon. and noble Friend the Minister for Women, has been published this week, and I hope that that, too, will help to inform and support those who might be affected.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): In the light of press reports today, may I reinforce the plea by the shadow Leader of the House for a statement on Northern Ireland next week, in particular to discover whether the Secretary of State believes that the Chief Constable is giving evidence when he speaks unequivocally on television, or whether it is just hearsay, and whether the chief medical officer for Northern Ireland has given any guidance about the possibilities of death by lead poisoning or sadistic punishments?

Mrs. Beckett: I shall certainly bear in mind the hon. Gentleman's wish for a discussion on those matters. He will know that all hon. Members deplore the continuing level of violence and brutality. I know that he takes these matters seriously, but I should say that I share strongly the view expressed by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister yesterday that, if the peace process were to come to an end, the result would not be less violence in Northern Ireland.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): When can we debate early-day motion 254?

[*That this House notes that since 1974, 140 Government posts have been held by unelected members of the House of Lords; and resolves that as part of the wider reform of the House of Lords, such appointments should cease and that the terms of reference of the Royal Commission should be enlarged to enable such a recommendation to be made.*]

Although there is a great deal of humbug from the Opposition about the quality of answers to parliamentary questions, and although in their period in office they zealously pursued a denial-of-information policy in respect of this House, there is concern when Ministers who are refusing to answer questions are not available and are not Members of this House. In one particular instance, I have had great difficulty over many months with answers to letters and questions while trying to put into the public domain a matter of some importance: the amount, and details, of medicinal drugs issued to prisoners.

Three deaths have occurred in Brixton prison, which was the subject of a case this week, and last year there were two deaths of women in prison. Strangely, the Minister involved refuses to publish details of how many, and what type, of medicinal drugs are issued in prison, on the extraordinary ground that the information is available locally but would be expensive to collect centrally.

I have obtained the help of a trust, which is offering to put up money to pay for that information to be available, but it is absolutely outrageous that a Minister who is not responsible to this House should deny Members of this House that information.

Mrs. Beckett: All Ministers, of course, are responsible on behalf of the Government as a whole and endeavour to give answers that are as full as they can be. I understand and share my hon. Friend's concern that full answers should be given wherever possible. Indeed, he and I well remember when the previous Government began to divert answers to questions away from this House. I have taken on board the point that he makes. It is not always as easy as it sometimes sounds to accumulate information, which may be gathered on a different basis in different localities.

My hon. Friend's observations about the previous Government are entirely right. A lot of the fuss that Conservative Members make—for example, about answers on ministerial travel—would certainly give people the impression, which my hon. Friend knows is entirely incorrect, that the rules have in some way changed. I suppose that, by Conservative Members'

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standards, they have changed, in that the rules that normally apply now apply to us, because we are Ministers; indeed, that seems to be the basis of their objection.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): Will the Leader of the House enable us to debate the £90 tax on food, which will affect about half a million small businesses and voluntary organisations? In the light of what the Prime Minister said yesterday, would not that give an opportunity for Government policy on that issue to be clarified? The right hon. Gentleman seemed to be disowning his own Government's policy, which has been to push ahead with imposing this unpopular tax on people who are in a poor position to pay it.

Mrs. Beckett: Let me make these points in response to the hon. Gentleman. First, the Conservative party claims that the measure is some kind of poll tax. If the poll tax had been as little as £90, it would not have been nearly as unpopular as it was. Secondly, his request for a debate suggests that he cannot have been paying any attention: if he had, he would realise that what has been announced is that there is a process of examination of the draft Food Standards Agency Bill by a parliamentary Committee set up for that purpose. What my right hon. Friend said yesterday was that the process of that examination and the consultation about the Bill is genuine, and we shall listen to the views expressed. That is not confusion; it is a clear statement that the Government will take heed of concerns that are expressed. If the Conservative party had done that, it might still be in power.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): Will my right hon. Friend make time next week for a debate on the betting industry? Ladbroke's, in my constituency, is creating 80 new, very welcome posts to run its expanded call centre. Can I tempt her to take advantage of the new, improved betting service offered by my constituents? She may, for example, like to join intelligent rugby fans nationwide and back Wales to win the five nations championship this year, or she might like to bet on which Conservative Front Benchers will survive the coming, much-needed shake-up in their ranks.

Mrs. Beckett: I am only too happy to welcome the creation of new jobs in my hon. Friend's constituency, particularly because they are part of more than 200,000 new vacancies that are being notified to jobcentres every month and part of a picture in which total employment has gone up by more than half a million since the general election.

With regard to my hon. Friend's pressing invitation to join him in a bet, I certainly would not dream of getting involved in predicting the results of rugby matches or Conservative Front-Bench reshuffles. My stance on gambling generally, as someone who has always had a highly marginal seat, is that I gamble only with my entire life and livelihood.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): If we follow the logic of the last question, is it not a sure-fire, odds-on certainty that, if the right hon. Lady continues to stonewall on the question of the Chancellor's travel arrangements, the story will become bigger than it is at present? It is of direct interest to the House that the Chancellor is the only Minister in his Department to refuse to give accurate information about the excessive travel arrangements made by him and his colleagues. When will he come clean to the House, and give detaiis of those arrangements? I know that Labour Members think that this is a joke—the Parliamentary Private Secretary certainly appears to—but it involves the Royal Air Force, whose members are currently under great stress and strain, and are about to go into harm's way. They have better things to do than bus around the Chancellor and his cronies.

Mrs. Beckett: Ministers in this Government have better things to do than waste their time, and that of their civil servants, answering nitpicking, mischief-making questions that are costly for the taxpayer. When Opposition Members descend to asking about the precise reasons for, and circumstances of, one 10-minute journey, the position is set clearly in context; but let me set it in a slightly wider context.

During the last Government's final three years in office, expenditure on ministerial overseas visits was in the region of between £6.5 million and £8 million a year. Under the present Government, it is running at about £4 million. The rules on travel have not changed in the slightest. During the last Government's final two years, 10 Ministers travelled on scheduled Concorde flights; under the present Government, only eight have done so. All this is rubbish. It is a phoney campaign by Conservative Members whose only aim seems to be to make it more difficult for Ministers to do their job. We shall resist that.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): Yesterday morning, I was trapped in a lift here with five Conservative Members. Discussion inevitably turned to my Right to Roam Bill. One Member representing a Derbyshire constituency said that the Conservatives would not be here for the Second Reading debate on 26 March, because my Bill would be scuppered by my own Government. Hon. Members can imagine my shock and disbelief.

As my Bill—of which I am very proud—is to be published next Monday or Tuesday, and given today's newspaper coverage speculating on the Government's position, would it not be a courtesy to the House for the Minister responsible to make a statement here on the Government's approach to the right to roam on open countryside?

Mrs. Beckett: I am well aware of my hon. Friend's devotion to the issue. I am afraid that I represent the city of Derby rather than any of the beautiful Derbyshire countryside represented by, for instance, my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner), but I know that the House will take great interest in the Bill. I can only say gently to my hon. Friend that, because—as he said himself—the Bill will not be published until next week, I feel that it would be premature for the Government to reach a view now, whatever press speculation may suggest.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Can the Leader of the House arrange for a statement to be made

about the Government's preparations against the possibility of our joining the single currency? Do they intend to publish a White or Green Paper?

Mrs. Beckett: I had not given much thought to whether a White or Green Paper would be published, but I shall draw the hon. Gentleman's request to the attention of my right hon. Friends. As for the preparations, the hon. Gentleman probably knows that, shortly after coming to power, the Government set up a joint committee containing representatives of business organisations, initially to prepare for the launch of the euro—a matter much neglected by the last Government, but one that will affect many in the business community, irrespective of whether Britain joins the currency. That is still under discussion; technical and other matters remain to be resolved, and discussions will continue. But I shall certainly draw the hon. Gentleman's request for a Paper of some sort to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Mr. Derek Twigg (Halton): In view of the welcome announcement by the Government of their campaign to recruit more nurses and the general interest in that matter, will my right hon. Friend find time for us to discuss nurse recruitment on the Floor of the House?

Mrs. Beckett: I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a discussion of nurse recruitment in the near future, although I share my hon. Friend's pleasure at the scale of both the effort that is being made by the Government and the response. He and the House may like to know that, up to now, some 8,000 calls have been made to the NHS hotline as a result of the Government's initiative.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): In view of this afternoon's serious and misguided announcement by the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, can we have an early debate on the plight of the United Kingdom beef industry? As late as last weekend, the Ministry was spinning the line that the beef ban would be lifted soon, yet today we are told that the ban is not even to be reviewed for six months. Can we have a debate urgently on the UK beef industry, so that we can review that matter, as well as the serious and looming problem of the spread of tuberculosis in the beef industry in the south-west?

Mrs. Beckett: I understand that the hon. Gentleman was in the House when that question was discussed for some 20 minutes. He will know that the announcement by my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food follows the very clear advice of the chief medical officer not to lift the ban. There is understanding of the concern of the industry among hon. Members in all parts of the House, but the hon. Gentleman will surely accept that my right hon. Friend—*[Interruption.]* I see the hon. Gentleman shake his head. I fear that the Government do not share his disregard for advice in those terms from the chief medical officer.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Can we please have a statement next week by the Minister for Small Firms, Trade and Industry, to whom I have written on the subject, to clarify his position in respect of the filing of accounts? The right hon. Lady will be aware that, at Trade and Industry questions a fortnight ago, the Minister declared confidently:

"Every company with which I have been associated has filed its returns in compliance with the deadlines set by Companies house."—[*Official Report*, 21 January 1999; Vol. 323, c. 1008.]

As it has since emerged that that is not true—as demonstrated in the media and in a letter to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood)—because Juniper Communications Ltd. filed late on at least three occasions, does the Leader of the House accept that the Minister for Small Firms, Trade and Industry should do the House the courtesy of coming here to make a statement to explain himself and, if necessary, to apologise?

Mrs. Beckett: No. That would be a complete waste of the House's time. My hon. Friend the Minister for Small Firms, Trade and Industry wrote to the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) on 29 January to make it plain that his answer in the House referred to an inaccurate story in *The Times* diary about Attractions Ltd., about which, as I understand it, the right hon. Gentleman had written to him. The Minister has written to him again today.

The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) is an assiduous attender at Trade and Industry questions, so he will remember that, in his early days in his present post, the right hon. Member for Wokingham informed me that the Conservative party would say nothing about policy in its first two years in opposition. His time is almost up. I suggest that they come in.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): If the Leader of the House will not find time for an early personal statement by one Minister who has strayed, perhaps she will consider early-day motion 269?

[*That this House notes that the Right honourable Member for Hartlepool has not made a statement to the House following his resignation from the Government; also notes reports that his loan will not be redeemed from the family funds he indicated were due to be remitted to him; and calls upon him to confirm to the House that any profit from the sale of his property will be given to charity and not kept for himself.*]

The right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) has so far made no personal statement about the circumstances that lie behind his recent retirement, to coin a phrase. Nor has he yet told the House or anyone else what he intends to do with the excessive profits that it looks like he will make out of the sale of his house. Will she find time for him to make such a personal statement?

Mrs. Beckett: No.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): Will the right hon. Lady arrange for the Secretary of State for Health to make a statement next week on the royal commission on long-term care? She will recall that, on 4 December 1997, the right hon. Gentleman said that he was confident that it would report in 12 months. It is now two calendar months late—and counting. With the exception of leaks to the press about what the royal commission is to say, we have heard nothing, despite the confidence of the Secretary of State, so will she arrange for a statement?

Mrs. Beckett: I cannot undertake to arrange for a statement in the near future, especially as my right

[Mrs. Beckett]

hon. Friend the Secretary of State answered Health questions only this week, when the matter could have been raised. I shall certainly draw the hon. Gentleman's concern to the attention of my right hon. Friend. I am confident that it is a concern that he shares.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): The Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill is currently in Committee. The right hon. Lady said that the Committee stage of clause 1 will be debated on the Floor of the House next Wednesday. Can she confirm that that debate will not be curtailed by a 7 o'clock deadline and that there will be a full debate? Can the right hon. Lady also confirm—it should not be a problem—that there will be a free vote on amendments to clause 1 dealt with on the Floor of the House next Wednesday? Can she further confirm that Labour Members will have a free vote on new clauses which have to be taken upstairs because of the way in which the Bill has been split but which relate to clause 1 issues rather than the abuse of trust? Opposition parties have already agreed that their Members will have a free vote.

Mrs. Beckett: I regret that I have not gone into the detail of how all those matters will be handled. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will know that the way in which they are handled and the way in which the selection is made are matters for the Chair. It is the Government's intention to have a free vote on conscience matters. There is no wish to curtail the debate on Wednesday, but it is sometimes for the convenience of the House to have a reasonable time for debate with hon. Members being quite clear about when votes are likely to take place. I should tell the hon. Gentleman, who although being an assiduous Member is still a newish Member, that that is particularly true of a free vote.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Will the right hon. Lady be kind enough to reconsider her answer about a debate on the White Paper on the House of Lords? She will know that there is to be such a debate in the other place. She will know that many of her hon. Friends failed to participate in the debate this week because of a lack of time. She will also know that the Chairman of Ways and Means will have to ensure that every amendment tabled to the Bill is strictly relevant and that it will not therefore be possible to have a wide-ranging debate—quite properly so—in Committee of the whole House. Can the right hon. Lady ensure that we have a proper opportunity to debate the wider issues and the White Paper?

Mrs. Beckett: No, I am afraid I cannot undertake to do that. The hon. Gentleman is right that the House of Lords is having another debate on the White Paper. He will also know that it had two days debate on the general issue as long ago as October. It is natural that the House of Lords should wish to spend more time on this matter, but the Government are conscious of the fact that we are providing substantial amounts of time for debate on what is a simple Bill, and that all of it will be on the Floor of the House. We are anxious that the House should not lose sight of what the Bill does—as opposed to discussing at great length all the issues that could conceivably be raised on House of Lords reform as a whole. We have been doing that already for some 88 years, which makes us feel that one more day is not necessary.

Orders of the Day

Police

1.28 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): I beg to move,

That the Police Grant Report (England and Wales) 1999–2000 (HC 179), which was laid before this House on 1st February, be approved.

One of the great joys of being the Minister responsible for the police is that one has an opportunity to go around and about our country visiting constabularies and meeting the dedicated men and women who serve as police officers. I have now had the privilege of visiting over a quarter of the constabularies in our country. One gets a sense of the sterling work that is being done up and down the land. The public are taking advantage of the framework now provided by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 to build effective partnerships to help prevent and detect crime and to build the safety and security that is the bedrock of successful communities.

At this time, it is encouraging to hear from conversations with chief constables, members of police authorities and the officers on the ground their renewed sense of the importance of budget management and sound financial planning. Financial planning will deliver efficient and effective policing, to tackle crime and disorder and to help create safer towns and cities.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Boateng: I shall, of course, give way to the right hon. Gentleman eventually, but I should make a little more of my speech first.

The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 puts police at the heart of strategies to combat crime and disorder. However, tackling crime is not the job of police alone—which is why, in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, we placed a new statutory duty on local authorities and police together to create local partnerships to reduce crime. The chief constables whom I have met across the country, and their police authorities, are fully committed to implementing the Government's legislation and to working in partnership with other agencies in their communities.

Today's debate is not about funding police authorities in England and Wales only in the context of the numbers of police officers, but about their funding and their effectiveness. *[Interruption.]* The shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler), with a quizzical look on his face, asks "Why not?" I will tell him why not.

In 1994, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard)—with the right hon. Gentleman's connivance and support; he voted for the change—took away the Home Secretary's right to determine police numbers. It therefore does not sit well for the shadow Home Secretary to ask why today's debate is not about police numbers.

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Boateng: In a minute.

The debate is not about police numbers, because you and the previous Government removed—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I hope that the Minister will give way to me, simply to remind him that he is addressing the occupant of the Chair.

Mr. Boateng: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield and the previous Government took away from the Home Secretary the right to determine police numbers.

Sir Norman Fowler: The hon. Gentleman is becoming very defensive very early in his speech. Is he saying that there is no relationship between the amount of resources provided to the police service and police manpower? Is not the Home Secretary the police authority of the Metropolitan police? Does not the Home Office therefore have any view on police numbers?

Mr. Boateng: The relationship has to be determined by the chief constable, as chief officer and as the person with operational responsibility for the deployment of his force. The right hon. Gentleman will have his opportunity eventually—when we debate London, and the Home Secretary's role as London police authority—to make the points that he would like to make.

The shadow Home Secretary knows very well that it is utterly disingenuous for Conservative Members to suggest that the Home Secretary has any power to direct chief constables on the numbers of men and women whom they deploy in their force. Although I have no doubt that we shall return, ad nauseam, to his question on police numbers, he and the House should realise that that is not what today's debate is about.

Today's debate is about how, together—let us explore the matter—we create an effective force to bear down on crime and disorder, we build partnerships between police and public in our communities, and we fund those partnerships. The shadow Home Secretary will recall that the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe, with some pride, said:

"In future, the number of constables in a force will be a matter for local decision . . . It is not a matter for me."—[*Official Report*, 26 April 1994; Vol. 242, c. 113.]

Now the shadow Home Secretary wants to make numbers a matter for me and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. However, we do not intend to allow him to do so.

Sir David Madel (South-West Bedfordshire): Will the Minister give way.

Mr. Boateng: No, not now.

We have to take a good long and hard look at what the figures tell us. In 1998-99, total spending on policing in England and Wales is estimated to be about £7.5 billion. Around 65 per cent. of expenditure on the criminal justice system goes on policing. The Government's overall spending plans for the police over the next three years were announced by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary last July, following the comprehensive spending review. There will be an extra £1.24 billion for the police service in England and Wales between 1999 and 2002.

[Mr. Boateng]

The total police authority spending for 1999–2000, to which the Government are prepared to contribute their share, will be £7.14 billion. That amount is known as the total standard spending assessment and it represents an increase of £186 million or 2.7 per cent. on the figure for 1998-99.

We have looked beyond next year and announced spending figures for the following two years to allow police authorities to plan ahead with greater confidence—something that they were never able to do when policing was in the stewardship of the Conservatives.

Sir David Madel: A few minutes ago the Minister lauded the partnership scheme. He will know that Bedfordshire is at the forefront of that and is probably the best in the country. Why is Bedfordshire rewarded with such a dreadfully poor settlement?

Mr. Boateng: The hon. Gentleman has been to see me with his chief constable and other Members of Parliament, including Labour Members, to pray in aid and make representations on behalf of the Bedfordshire force. I was glad to see them. I am equally glad to say that one of my enduring memories of that meeting is the success of the tripartite relationship in Bedfordshire between the police authority, the chief constable and the Home Office. Central to that tripartite relationship is the fact that it is for the chief constable to determine the level of deployment of the men and women at his command. We have given him and the authority adequate resources to carry that out. They will be able to build on the successful partnerships that they have created in Bedfordshire. I am only too pleased to give them and Members of Parliament representing Bedfordshire full credit for those partnerships.

Looking beyond the coming year, spending on the police will increase by 2.8 per cent. in 2000-01 and by a further 4 per cent. in 2001-02. That represents a real-terms increase, albeit modest, and demonstrates the Government's commitment to helping the police to play their key part in tackling crime and disorder.

The settlement also takes forward the Government's commitment to improve efficiency in the police service. We have set a target of 2 per cent. efficiency improvements year on year from 1999-2000. Importantly, we are not requiring the police to hand back the efficiency savings that they make. On the contrary, by achieving their targets, chief constables will be able to reinvest the savings to help meet front-line policing priorities. Once again, I note a quizzical, even sceptical look passing across the face of the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield and his hon. Friends. I have news for them. All the chief constables and police authority chairmen whom I have met recognise the advantage that that will give their local police force and are grateful for it. The hon. Member for South–West Bedfordshire (Sir D. Madel), who prayed in aid his case for Bedfordshire recognises that, as—I do not tell tales out of school—it was the thrust of the remarks made around my table when he came to see me. Of course the police want more and hon. Members will ask for more, but they recognise the value of being able to reinvest the 2 per cent. efficiency savings that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary won for them in the comprehensive spending review. Potentially up to £140 million could be freed up to recycle into front-line policing. That is good news, as I hope Opposition Members appreciate.

In recent years, the police service has been comparatively insulated from many of the pressures facing other parts of the public sector. The efficiency improvements that we are seeking now are no different from those that were expected by the previous Administration of, for example, the prison service, the probation service or the national health service, and then delivered. For example, the probation service has made efficiency gains of over 20 per cent. since 1994, and the prison service has achieved reductions of 24 per cent. in real terms per cost per prisoner since 1992–93. In that context, the 2 per cent. target for the police is reasonable and achievable.

The efficiency planning process is an important step towards the best value regime from April 2000 that will require the police to demonstrate that they are delivering an effective, efficient, and high-quality service.

I now turn to the links about funding and performance. In recent years, national increases in police spending have not always been spread evenly across the service. Some forces have received relatively less than others. That is one of the effects of a needs-based formula, but increased resources do not automatically improve levels of service. That is not simply my opinion. It is the conclusion of the independent Audit Commission. Its latest annual report on police performance published on 28 January said that

"there is still no direct correlation between increased spending and improved performance at the level of individual forces."

It continued:

"Some of the forces which have improved their performance the most have had relatively modest increases in spending, while others who have increased spending significantly have either improved less than those with smaller increases, or, in a few cases, have seen their performance deteriorate".

We have to take seriously that lesson from the Audit Commission.

Undoubtedly, chief constables and police authorities up and down the country are beginning to reflect on their performance. Let us take an example. The spending of Warwickshire constabulary reduced by more than 5 per cent. in the four years 1994-95 and 1997-98, after adjustments for inflation. During the same period, the percentage of all crimes detected by primary means by the force increased. In particular, detections for household burglaries increased by more than 5 per cent.

Despite the operation of the formula, with its aim of trying to balance needs in an objective way, much of the present relative spending levels can only be explained historically. Thus, for example, according to latest Audit Commission figures, Merseyside police spend £158 per head of population—the highest of any force outside London and £43 above the national average of £115—while the next highest force—Greater Manchester—receives £22 per head less than Merseyside.

The Audit Commission also has a number of important points to make about police numbers. There is a general view that more police officers will lead to increases in the proportion of crime cleared up. I hope that Conservative Members do not adhere to that view out of a spirit of party political partisanship and that in their contributions to the debate they will make clear their understanding

of—and support for—the Audit Commission's analysis. If they do not, we will know that they are prepared to play party political games with the policing of the country.

I lay down that challenge to Conservative Members, and I expect them to respond to it. If we are to have a rational debate about policing, we must build it on the evidence available; otherwise, we shall not be taken seriously about an issue that matters so much to our fellow citizens and constituents, and which police officers and police authorities have to confront.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Boateng: In due course, but a closer examination of what the Audit Commission has to say on the matter may help the right hon. Gentleman to make his point. The report states:

"In some forces, there were increases in the number of police officers per 1,000 of the population, but the percentage of crimes solved stayed the same or fell . . . This reinforces the point . . . that success in solving crime does not depend solely on the number of police officers available."

The Audit Commission made an even more telling finding. It states:

"Some forces with the biggest reductions in numbers of police officers have also recorded some of the largest increases in the percentage of crimes detected during the same period."

That finding requires an explanation from Conservative Members, who would make a totem of police numbers.

Mr. Beith: Does the Minister acknowledge that, for the public, deploying a sufficient number of uniformed police officers in the community is an important factor in reducing the fear of crime and making people feel safe on the streets?

Mr. Boateng: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, as I am about to deal with that precise point.

Of course, the number of police on our streets remains important. The public feel reassured by the visible presence of police officers on patrol. However, people are also concerned about efficient and effective policing. It is clear from the Audit Commission's report that we must move way from sterile and simplistic arguments about police numbers. Rather, we must move towards the efficient and well targeted use of resources, and the imaginative use of technology.

Indeed, what has transformed the public's safety in many town and city centres—and on many estates as well—has not been an increase in the numbers of police officers on undirected patrol, but a huge increase in coverage by closed circuit television, which in turn has freed up officers for detection and prevention duties.

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): Does my hon. Friend agree that, in addition to the number of officers visible on the streets, it is also important that the police deal with matters that people consider to be important? My hon. Friend was in my constituency last weekend, and he will know that the partnership introduced by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, which he mentioned earlier, has enabled the local community to discuss with the police those matters that they feel to be important. The consequent reduction in crime depends not simply on police numbers, but on the police doing their job in accordance with the objectives of the community.

Mr. Boateng: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In Gedling, I saw about 100 people from the police, the public, the local authority, voluntary organisations and neighbourhood watch. They came together, giving up a Saturday, to determine local policing priorities and to build effective strategies to prevent and reduce crime. They did so within the context provided by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, a law that owes its introduction, implementation and success to the return of a Labour Government in 1997.

We must be clear about the context of our debate. It is not only about partnerships such as those. It is also about technology, and about commitments to new strategies for policing being developed by chief officers and the men and women under their commands. It is important to manifest a police presence in different and novel ways.

Yesterday, I visited Stonehouse and Stroud in Gloucestershire, where one of the most successful innovations has been police information posts. The reality of rural policing is that the numbers game simply does not operate in a way that would provide the assurance referred to by the right hon. Member for Berwick–upon–Tweed (Mr. Beith). Information posts are being developed in post offices and shops in rural towns and villages. People are able to make contact with the police, and the use of new technology provides a presence that not only reassures people, but assists in detection and prevention.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): Will the Minister give way.

Mr. Boateng: I am afraid that I must get on. The [illegible] Gentleman may have a chance to make his own speech.

The Government welcome the Audit Commission's recommendation that local people and the local media should use the commission's report to ask questions about the performance and efficiency of local forces. The Audit Commission has given us an opportunity to stimulate debate about the most effective ways in which to provide policing services.

Only last week, we heard about the radical reorganisation being put in place by the chief constable of West Midlands police. He is streamlining senior posts, restructuring major investigation teams and transferring posts from headquarters to local sectors. All that will release more officers for front-line duties, with up to 300 more constables freed to reinforce local operational command units. The chief constable has said that his decisions have led to a turnaround in performance, with crime levels coming down and detection rates going up. That is an excellent example of well targeted, efficient and effective use of resources.

Similarly, the chief constable of Lincolnshire is restructuring top-tier management and merging some divisions to improve community policing. The local newspaper, the *Lincolnshire Echo*, succinctly put it: "Less brass means more coppers". [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh dear."] Liberal Democrat Members have made something of a political totem of their press releases to local newspapers such as the *Lincolnshire Echo*. In *Focus*, their own publication, they have sought time and again to engender

[Mr. Boateng]

precisely that kind of headline. You should be revelling in it rather than pouring scorn on a headline that, for once, tells its own story. You could learn a lesson or two from it for *Focus*.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry to have to pull the Minister up, but we are trying to encourage all hon. Members to remember the correct forms of address, and Ministers must conform.

Mr. Boateng: I stand chastened. However, there is more than an element of truth in that headline. It is not all about more money. We need to recognise and build on that point.

Let me turn to the details of next year's funding settlement. The police service has given its general support for the continued distribution of police grant in accordance with the needs-based funding formula that was introduced in 1995.

Ms Jackie Lawrence (Preseli Pembrokeshire): My right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael) initiated a review on population sparsity, which is part of the needs-based formula. Is that research continuing and when will it be published?

Mr. Boateng: It is certainly continuing. Hon. Members will regard it as particularly important research. If memory serves, that change in the needs-based formula was pioneered by the Minister responsible for police before the general election. The recognition of the significance of sparsity to an effective needs-based funding formula draws support from both sides of the House. We await the outcome of that research. I hope that it will be with us in the coming year. We will reflect on its implications for the formula.

The police service has given its general support for the continuing distribution of the police grant in the way that I described. We therefore propose to continue to allocate virtually all police grant by means of the funding formula. However, we propose a few changes to reflect the latest data available and in response to representations.

There are two principal changes. First, we are reducing the share of funding allocated on the basis of historical manpower levels in forces from 20 per cent. to 10 per cent. The weighting given to this element of the formula, which was introduced to provide some continuity with the old funding arrangements, was first set at 50 per cent. but has been reduced progressively over the past few years. It is right that it should be given progressively less significance as confidence in the needs-based formula continues to grow. The Association of Police Authorities supports the measure.

The other proposed change is to increase from 13.2 to 14.5 per cent. the proportion of funding allocated on the basis of forces' pensions commitments. This is in recognition of the continuing increase in police pensions costs, which I know concerns hon. Members.

I have some words on Metropolitan police funding because two other elements in the settlement are to be introduced next year. We propose that the Metropolitan police should continue to receive additional funding in recognition of its distinct, exceptional, national and capital city functions. It has proved difficult for the principal formula to take account of those circumstances. To maintain public confidence in the capital and its policing, the special payment will be increased next year by £25 million from £151 million to £176 million.

Some chief constables and police authorities have criticised the increase as special treatment for the Met. It is no such thing. The Metropolitan police face extra burdens in policing the capital city and extra national responsibilities, of which all hon. Members are well aware. The overall settlement means that the Metropolitan police will receive funding of £1.744 billion next year, an increase of 1.7 per cent. over the 1998-99 figure and significantly below the national average increase. More than 30 forces will receive larger funding increases than the Met next year.

The financial year 2000-01 will see the establishment of the Metropolitan police authority, which will, for the first time, give Londoners a police authority that is democratically accountable to them.

Policing is rooted in local communities. Any police force will increase its effectiveness if it can secure the support and co-operation of local people. The Metropolitan police authority will give a significant boost to the Met's current programme of work to involve the people of London. It will therefore deliver not only a more accountable police force, but a more effective one.

The MPA will be part of the single financial structure provided by the Greater London Authority Bill. This covers the mayor and assembly, the London development agency, Transport for London and the London fire and emergency planning authority, as well as the MPA. The Greater London authority will set the MPA's budget. However, the Home Secretary will have the power to set a minimum budget to ensure that the MPA is able to secure an efficient and effective police force. There will also be provision for an agreement between the Home Secretary and the MPA to set standards for the Met's performance of its national and international functions.

A further provision of the GLA Bill is the amendment of the Metropolitan police district boundaries. With effect from 1 April 2000, they will be brought into line with the boundaries of the 32 London boroughs.

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): The Minister may be about to turn to this issue. Will he clarify why the Met will receive no special transitional funds with which to meet the cost of boundary changes? I met Sir Paul Condon yesterday, and he estimated that the cost to the Met would be about £10 million.

Mr. Boateng: The Metropolitan police have made it clear that they can handle the additional cost—indeed, they are offloading their responsibilities onto the surrounding counties and we are compensating them. That suggestion is a little rich—I do not think that the hon. Gentleman will get a *Focus* headline out of it. *[Interruption.]* I do not intend to be drawn further down that road.

It is important to recognise that responsibility for those parts of the Metropolitan police district within Essex, Hertfordshire and Surrey will transfer to those three police authorities. In the settlement, the Government have recognised that, in making sensible preparations for the change, the three authorities will incur significant

additional costs next year. Therefore, the hon. Gentleman should be aware that we have set aside a total of £12 million to help the three authorities prepare for the change and meet those transitional costs. We have awarded an extra £2 million to Essex, £3 million to Hertfordshire and £7 million to Surrey, and those payments are reflected in the grant report.

I know that future changes to the funding formula, are a source of concern to many right hon. and hon. Members. Applying a needs-based funding formula inevitably means that there will be winners and a few losers. Not surprisingly, it is the losers who dislike the operation of the formula—and I fancy that we shall hear from one or two of them today.

I met chief constables from a number of forces during the consultation period on the settlement, along with members of their police authority and, in some cases, right hon. and hon. Members. In each case—I have referred to a meeting that the hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire attended—there was no doubt that the police forces were delivering a professional, efficient and effective service with the resources available to them. Each and every chief constable made it clear that he did not oppose the principles of the funding formula. None had come to whinge or complain, and it is correct to say—as I do in the presence of several hon. Members who accompanied their chief officers to the meetings—that none did. That sort of atmosphere did not prevail at any of the meetings. Each set out how they proposed to manage their budget next year and their plans for future years. My officials and I were enormously impressed by their approach to the challenges.

Three recurrent issues emerged: the pressures of policing urban metropolitan areas; the problems of policing sparsely populated rural areas; and the continuation of the old force establishment component in the formula. We have commissioned independent, external research into both density and sparsity and I hope that the results of the research will be available shortly and prove to be conclusive. Meanwhile, we have retained in the formula for next year the sparsity element introduced by the previous Government, even though no objective evidence currently exists to justify it. Although objective evidence is lacking, the views expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Ms Lawrence) on the value of the sparsity element have been reflected in all the representations made to me.

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): In the review of the national formulae, will my hon. Friend examine the implications of the local formulae used within individual police authorities? I accept that the formulae used nationally have to be adjusted in line with changes in density, sparsity and other factors. However, the formula used within the Metropolitan police authority has a bizarre result in that individual divisions are penalised for success: where local partnerships work effectively and crime decreases, there is a loss of staff. My local division, Hillingdon, has lost 91 staff in three years as a result of its success. There is a need to go beyond the review of national formulae and examine individual authority formulae and their implications on the ground.

Mr. Boateng: That is a matter for local decisions: that is the nature of the tripartite arrangement. One of the important aspects that we have preserved in the creation of a Metropolitan police authority is the continued operation of that tripartite arrangement. My hon. Friend has experience of serving with me on a citywide authority at a time when demand for a police authority for London was especially clearly articulated. He will know that the issue he raises is one that the new Metropolitan police authority will want to address with its chief officer, and the Home Office can be relied on to assist in every way possible.

A number of forces have made plain their case for recognition of what they describe as particular funding pressures: for example, Staffordshire and Warwickshire in respect of the Birmingham northern relief road; and Devon and Cornwall in respect of the eclipse. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State recently met a delegation of right hon. and hon. Members representing Kent constituencies in connection with the extra burdens faced by the Kent force in having to deal with illegal entrants and asylum seekers. We recognise that all hon. Members have views on the issue. I can say only that it has to be understood that, from time to time, all forces have to deal with additional, often unforeseen, pressures. We shall carefully consider the requests made, but I can give no undertakings at this stage. Even if special payments were justified on their merits, it might not be possible to find additional funds until the time of next year's settlement.

Mr. George Stevenson (Stoke-on-Trent, South): My hon. Friend mentions Staffordshire and the Birmingham northern relief road. The police authority faces significant extra expense from having to police the protests that are occurring there, but the 1.7 per cent. increase in Staffordshire police authority funding is well below the national average. I hope that my hon. Friend will give the most sympathetic hearing possible to representations made in respect of the special extra costs that fall on authorities such as Staffordshire, which already suffer from a lower than average increase in the police grant.

Mr. Boateng: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for so clearly making the case for Staffordshire. I have listened to him and other hon. Members and I shall bear in mind their representations.

In conclusion, I turn briefly to capital expenditure. After several years of actual cuts in police capital provision, we are heading for a period of stability. Police capital funding will remain at £144 million next year—the same figure as this year. We have also announced that our plans will allow capital funding to remain stable at £144 million until 2001-02. We have given the three-year figures, again in a spirit of partnership and to allow police authorities to plan ahead with confidence.

Changes in the capital receipts rules mean that forces are now free to use all proceeds of sale. We have freed them from the ridiculous restrictions of the previous Administration. Next year, all funding for major police building programmes is being maintained, as the Association of Chief Police Officers and the police authorities wanted. At the same time, we have been able to increase funding for minor capital works, vehicles and equipment by 2 per cent. for all forces. That is the first such increase for four years. That was never achieved under the previous Administration. *[Interruption.]* I hear Conservative Members muttering and moaning, but they

[Mr. Boateng]

must face the fact that we have achieved something that they were unable to achieve. They ought at least to have the grace to recognise that.

This Government came into office with a determination to reduce crime levels and the fear of crime, to tackle youth offending and to reform the performance of the criminal justice system overall. We also promised to relieve the police of unnecessary bureaucratic burdens to get more officers back on the beat. We are doing just that. That policy is working; it is delivering to the police and to the public and will continue to do so. This is a Government who take a stand against crime and disorder. This is a Government who put public money to most effective use. The order that we are debating today does just that and I hope that it will receive the support of the House.

2.12 pm

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): The Minister's speech was very long and did not get any better as it went on. It amounted to a weak defence of the Government's position. The Minister's central point—that there is no relationship between resources and police strength—is ludicrous. At one point, he came near to arguing that fewer police would lead to higher detection rates, which is also pretty stupid. In essence, that confirmed our worst fears about the Government's policy on the police service.

We shall oppose the order on this basis:

"One of the functions of the House is to judge Governments by what they promise at elections. On that test, they have palpably failed the House—and, more important, the police and the public."

Those are the words used by the then Opposition spokesman on home affairs to explain why, in January 1995, the Labour party voted against the police grant in a similar debate. The 1995 order gave more money, not less, to the police than does today's order. That in no way blunted the then Opposition's enthusiasm to take up the police cause.

Who was the Opposition spokesman? Of course, it was the right hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr. Straw), who is now the Home Secretary. What was his case? It was clear. He said that

"police services say that they will have to cut police numbers."—[*Official Report*, 31 January 1995; Vol. 253, c. 962-963.]

I am not, therefore, exclusively arguing that case; it has also been made by the Home Secretary. He argued that too few resources were going to the police service.

Let there be no doubt that the strength and resources of the police service were part of Labour's promised policy in the last election. People listened to the then shadow Home Secretary and drew the obvious conclusion that a new Labour Government were promising more police and more resources.

Mr. Boateng *indicated dissent.*

Sir Norman Fowler: The hon. Gentleman denies that. Why, then, did the shadow Home Secretary make those statements in the debate four years ago? It does not make sense. Why did the shadow Home Secretary lead his party into the Division Lobby to oppose a settlement more generous than the one that he is making today? Of course the public took Labour's actions into account. They did not believe that when the Labour Opposition said that, in government, they would be

"tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime",

they were setting the scene for the biggest reduction in police numbers for 20 years, but let us be in no doubt that that is precisely what is happening today and that it will happen for the next three years.

When the then shadow Home Secretary was asked about his own plans by my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce), to whom I have spoken about this matter, he replied:

"If he retains his seat, I invite him to sit on this side of the House and listen to my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown) announcing in his first Budget the details of our spending plans."—[*Official Report*, 31 January 1995; Vol. 253, c. 964.]

My hon. Friend is back, and very welcome he is too, but that is the end of the good news. We all listened to the Chancellor's first Budget and his comprehensive spending review and we have all seen the results.

There is to be the toughest squeeze on police spending for over a decade. There is no question about that whatsoever. The financial commitment of the previous Conservative Government will not be increased as Labour suggested—it will be cut drastically. That is the essence of the charge against the Government. They have broken their promises. They knew perfectly well that if they went to the country saying, "We shall reduce spending on the police and cut police numbers", they would lose votes and they would lose seats, so they did not say that. They hid behind generalised slogans. There is no question but that this settlement marks the worst news for the police since the Labour party was last in government.

Let me remind the House of the record since 1979. Between 1979-80 and 1996-97, there was a cash increase for the police of 354 per cent. In real terms, that is above inflation. Indeed, there was a real terms increase of 72 per cent. during the lifetime of the previous Conservative Government. Under this Government—if they last for five years, as the comprehensive spending review assumes—there will certainly be a cash increase. Not even this Government would reduce the cash, but the real terms increase over five years will be less than 1 per cent. However one does the sums, the Government's financial commitment has been reduced.

Mr. Chris Mullin (Sunderland, South): Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman can assist me on a point that I have always found slightly puzzling. When in government, his party always demanded, and rightly so, greater efficiency from all areas of public service—with the single exception of the police. The Conservatives have always been willing to overlook, at least in public but not always in private, the scams and rackets that have gone on in the police force and which, in many areas, led to very poor service. Those are now being dealt with.

Sir Norman Fowler: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman raised that matter because I was about to make that point.

We accept the need for efficiency savings. Let us be under no illusion: efficiency savings in the police took place under the previous Conservative Government; they have not suddenly been invented. One need only talk to

the Metropolitan Commissioner, the chief constable of West Midlands or the chief constable of West Yorkshire to realise that efficiency savings were not suddenly introduced in 1997. They had been making those savings for years, and rightly so.

In the same way, the Audit Commission is entirely valuable in guiding the police and setting performance targets. We back that process and it is one of the factors that needs to be taken into account.

The question is whether the amount of cash and the efficiency savings will meet the costs of the police, including the unavoidable cost of pay and pensions. We believe that, given the Government's settlement, they will not.

Under previous Conservatives Governments—this cannot be denied—the strength of the police service in England and Wales increased by more than 15,000. No one in his wildest dreams thinks that we shall see an increase of that size under Labour. Indeed, no one thinks that we shall see an increase at all.

Angela Smith (Basildon): I am listening with great interest to the right hon. Gentleman. He is arguing, quite commendably, for far more money to be put into the police force. Has he checked that with his shadow Treasury Front-Bench team, which described Labour's spending plans as reckless and said that the Government should spend less?

Sir Norman Fowler: I will if the hon. Lady or the Minister concedes that we spent more money on the police service than this Labour Government are spending. I give way to the hon. Lady.

Angela Smith: The right hon. Gentleman is asking me to intervene on him; it is most unusual. No, I will not concede that.

Sir Norman Fowler: In that case, the question does not make a great deal of sense. If she will not concede that we spent more, I cannot entirely understand her point.

Angela Smith: I shall assist the right hon. Gentleman. He is constantly arguing for more money for the police force, yet his Treasury spokesperson, the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), described Labour's spending plans as reckless. Has the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) checked his proposal for extra spending on the police service with his shadow Treasury Front-Bench team?

Sir Norman Fowler: The hon. Lady is struggling, but I shall give her a reply.

Mr. Mike Hall (Weaver Vale): I bet the right hon. Gentleman does not answer the question.

Sir Norman Fowler: Even the Government Whip has broken into verse. I shall reply to him as well. I shall do so by adapting the reply that the then shadow home affairs spokesman, the present Secretary of State for the Home Department, gave in January 1995. I say to the hon. Member for Basildon (Angela Smith): "I share the hon. Lady's confidence that the Conservative party will win the next election. If she retains her seat, I invite her to sit on this side of the House and listen to my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) announcing in his first Budget the details of our spending plans." I would add that, under the Conservatives, the police will have the priority that they have always had under Conservative Governments. That is something that the Minister cannot say.

Mr. Boateng: I can say this: the right hon. Gentleman really must not be disingenuous. He went into the 1992 general election on a promise to increase numbers. We made no such promise in 1997. However, between March 1992 and March 1997, police numbers fell by 500. How does that square with the paeon of self praise in which the right hon. Gentleman has just engaged?

Sir Norman Fowler: The hon. Gentleman is arguing against himself. He talks of a fall of 500, but that is against a net increase in the police service under previous Conservative Governments of 15,300. There is no question about that.

Mr. Boateng *indicated dissent.*

Sir Norman Fowler: I do not want the hon. Gentleman to get to his feet again. He has already taken 45 minutes of the House's time, which is far too long in a debate of this length. He has the nerve to say that Labour did not make any pledges on police numbers. What on earth does he think the 1995 debate was about? Why did he oppose the police grant then? Why did his party vote against it? Why did the then shadow Home Secretary say that police numbers were going down? Of course pledges on police numbers and resources were made. The Government are wriggling. They know that they have cut the police force and police services.

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge): My right hon. Friend probably heard the intervention on the Minister of the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell), in which he described a 15.7 per cent. reduction in police numbers over three years—it is, in fact, over two years. He omitted to say that the Hillingdon division is now facing a reduction of 11 front-line officers. If the people of Hillingdon were told that at the election, the expression that Uxbridge or Hillingdon deserves better would have rang hollow.

Sir Norman Fowler: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend.

It is not only Conservative politicians who are saying that police numbers and police resources are going down. So is every organisation in the police service: that of the chief constables, that of the superintendents and, of course, the Police Federation.

Ms Lawrence: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Norman Fowler: I will not give way again.

Under Labour, police numbers are going down. In the first 18 months of this Government, there has already been a fall of almost 800 in the police service. Among the forces that have been affected are the Metropolitan police in London, Sussex, West Yorkshire, City of London,

[Sir Norman Fowler]

Kent, Essex, Nottinghamshire and Hertfordshire. I know from experience and from letters that I have received that many others, such as Bedfordshire, are feeling the strain.

Ms Lawrence: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Norman Fowler: I will not give way. I thought that I had made it clear that I will not be giving way again. Others want to speak, and we have already had to listen to the lengthiest speech from a Minister on the Government Front Bench in a three-hour debate that I can remember.

The strength of a force such as the City of London is now below the 1979 level, posing the question whether this Government want it to continue. I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), who is in Committee at the moment, has already taken up the issue.

Four years ago, the then shadow Home Secretary quoted the views of chief police officers. Those chief police officers have made it clear that they are not remotely happy today. Even more significant is the view of the Police Federation, which represents the bulk of policemen and policewomen. It says:

"One of this government's main manifesto pledges was to support law and order but Treasury officials have swung the axe on police budgets. This will result in fewer police officers, the closure of local stations and a reduction in front line services. The public deserves a police service which is properly maintained but with this budget they are being short changed."

In that, I believe that they speak for a vast number of policemen and policewomen.

Let us not believe that all commitments on police and crime were made before the election. A number have been made since, including a notable one from the Prime Minister himself. In September, on the day before the Prime Minister's speech to the Labour party's conference, the political editor of *The Times* predicted that the Prime Minister would endorse the zero-tolerance strategy following his talks in New York with the mayor of New York.

The political editor of *The Times* is a notable safe pair of hands. As it happened, he predicted exactly what the Prime Minister would say. In the unmistakable words of a new Labour scriptwriter, the Prime Minister endorsed the policy of zero tolerance, when he said:

"Don't show zero imagination. Help us to have zero tolerance of crime."

Three months ago, I went to New York to look at the city's zero-tolerance policing policy, which has been outstandingly successful. Calling it zero tolerance is an inaccurate description. It is, in effect, proactive policing. At its centre are morning meetings, where precinct captains are personally held to account by the chief of police. The number of robberies, burglaries and murders are traced and, above all, the action being taken to solve them is checked. The result is that crime has fallen by 40 per cent. New York, which used to be almost a byword for lawlessness, has been returned to the people, and citizens are moving back into the city.

What was the prelude to that zero-tolerance policy? The strength of the police in New York was increased by 7,000 officers. I met no policemen in New York, nor any criminologist to whom I talked, who would argue that the policy would have been so successful without those new police officers. Indeed, police numbers in the rest of the United States are also going up, and emphasis is being put on that. The Government have no such policy—we have heard it from the Minister. The policy that this Government are pursuing is that numbers will come down.

In New York, 40,000 policemen police a population of about the same size as London. Here, we have 26,000 police officers, but worst of all, the numbers are reducing. Over the past 18 months they have decreased by almost 600, and in my view there are further reductions to come. It is simply not possible to achieve the kind of success that has been achieved in New York with the kind of policies being pursued by the Government.

The issue goes beyond the detection of crime. It affects the nature of our police service and relations between police and public. We do not want a remote a police service. We want a police service as near to the public as we can get it. We await the report of the Stephen Lawrence inquiry. One of its central points will be relations between police and public. I shall in no way prejudge the results of that inquiry. We must learn the lessons of it—I make that clear.

I hope it will be recognised that relations between police and public in London are generally better than in any other European capital that I have visited. I have studied the police in most other European nations. I do not argue that things cannot be improved—of course they can—but we must avoid demoralising the police and generalising about the service. It would do the police the greatest harm if they were under the pressure of numbers and could not respond properly to the problems of the public.

In that regard, I say to the Minister that I am opposed to the idea that the police should be replaced, as advocated by one chief constable, by local authority patrols marked "Police Compliant" moving round the high street, drawn from the welfare-to-work programme and funded by central Government. Indeed, I would be tempted to laugh off that suggestion from a chief constable, had not the Home Secretary been quoted as saying that the chief constable's plans were "a real possibility".

We have an organised police precisely because of the breakdown of such arrangements. I am no more impressed when the Home Secretary says:

"If you talk to the public, they understand that you cannot have a police officer walking up and down their street all day and every day. You never had that. That was a myth about what happened in some golden age."

However, the Home Secretary gives a self-evidently absurd example. Of course there never was an age in which every street was constantly patrolled. Everyone knows that. Everyone agrees with that, but there was a time when there were more police patrols than there are now, and when chief constables did not have to envisage local authority patrols in their town centres.

The Government's reply, which we heard again today, is that that has nothing to do with them—it is all up to the chief constables and the police authorities. The fact is that for the Metropolitan police, the Home Secretary is the police authority. He must have a view. He should have

a view on police numbers nationally as well. One of the key objectives that he sets the Metropolitan police is to provide high-visibility policing to reassure the public.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the issue is not just numbers, but the abandonment of areas? In my constituency in Essex, we face the closure of a police station in Ingatestone, and the removal of policing from rural areas right across the constituency. As a police officer remarked to me, we will simply move crime around the rural areas.

Sir Norman Fowler: The Essex force is one of those that has been badly affected by the settlement. My hon. Friend, typically, raises an important issue for his constituency. I know from my postbag that the same complaint is repeated time and again around the country. It is not confined to Essex or the home counties. The Government should wake up to the complaint coming from ordinary people throughout the country.

Those people will not support a policy of smaller police forces, with fewer policemen and policewomen on patrol, and with substitute inadequate patrols set up to fill the gap. The public do not want that, nor do the police. It would weaken the link between police and public, and it would diminish the reputation of the police service in this country.

We will oppose the order this afternoon. We will oppose further reductions in the police service. The Government constantly speak about manifesto pledges and the mandate that they have. One thing is certain: they have no mandate to reduce the strength of the police service.

2.35 pm

Mr. Denzil Davies (Llanelli): I shall raise the problems faced by the Dyfed-Powys police authority, the police force that has responsibility for my constituency, the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Ms Lawrence) and the whole of west and mid-Wales.

The increase in funding that the Dyfed-Powys police authority will have for the coming year raises considerable concern, I am sorry to tell my hon. Friend the Minister of State. The increase can hardly be described as an increase at all. It is close to a standstill or—to use the word in vogue—stability.

Many figures are bandied around about the efficiency of police forces, and one sometimes treats them with scepticism. However, as I understand it from those who are experts in such figures and targets, the Dyfed-Powys police force probably has the highest crime detection rate of any force in England and Wales. It is also probably one of the most efficient police forces, if not the most efficient, in England and Wales.

The published increase in funding is to be 0.8 per cent., but that figure should be halved. I am told that 0.4 per cent. of the increase relates to additional and improved security at ports in the county of Pembrokeshire. Hon. Members will understand that. The increase is thus a mere 0.4 per cent., against a general inflation rate of 2.5 per cent. I would not argue that every public authority should have an increase corresponding to the general rate of inflation, but the Chancellor's target for inflation is 2.5 per cent. The figures provided to me by the chief constable are for an increase of 0.4 per cent.

The national increase for the entire police settlement is, as I understand it, 2.6 per cent.—my hon. Friend said 2.7 per cent. Against that figure, I argue that an increase of 0.4 per cent. is extremely low and, indeed, dangerous. The annual budget is £50 million, and the 0.4 per cent. increase comes to £200,000—merely a standstill, and not enough to enable the force to maintain its efficiency.

My hon. Friend made much of the 2 per cent. efficiency savings. He mentioned a global figure that could be reinvested. What would the figure be for the Dyfed-Powys police authority, if it must absorb that 2 per cent? As it is already extremely efficient, it will be difficult to extract another 2 per cent.

The Dyfed-Powys force will face considerable problems. Next year the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 will have to be absorbed into the system, which will cost money. Sadly, in west and mid-Wales, there is an increase in drug activity. Cases involving heroin and crack cocaine are causing grave concern to the chief constable. No doubt similar problems exist in other parts of the country, but we have not experienced them before in west Wales. If there are cuts in funding, there will have to be cuts in policing. I do not know what effect the settlement will have. Perhaps a number of police constables will be lost.

My hon. Friend, in an engaging and interesting speech, got himself a little lost when he rightly told us that more money does not mean that police forces will be more efficient. I entirely accept that one cannot just throw money at a problem, but I am not sure where his logic, or the lack of it, led him then. Certainly one member of the Bar is not the right person to criticise another member of the Bar for sophistry. I shall be kind and say that, at that point in his speech, my hon. Friend was at least verging on sophistry and casuistry, but perhaps one should not say any more about that.

There will have to be cuts. Perhaps they will not fall on police constables; perhaps they will be across the board. But they will have some effect on my excellent police force, which is probably one of the most efficient in the country. Formulae and needs assessments come and go, but Ministers are there to rise above these algebraic equations sometimes and determine these matters. I ask my hon. Friend to reconsider the matter. The consequence will be that the battle against crime in mid and west Wales will, next year, be less effective.

There is a further consequence. If a force as efficient as Dyfed-Powys is not given any more money, people will start to wonder what is the point of being more efficient, and having better and better target figures for the clean-up of crime as next year they will have less money. I am sure that people will not stop trying to be more efficient, but people do feel that way. Even if the chief constable does not feel like that and operates in a wholly rational way, people lower down may feel that way, and that is bound to affect the morale of an excellent police force.

Therefore, I ask my hon. Friend to look at the matter again. I know that Back Benchers always say that they are not talking about large sums of money—but in this case, I am not. At the margin, it is a little sum for the Government but, at the margin, it is a considerable

[Mr. Denzil Davies]

amount for the Dyfed-Powys police force. I ask my hon. Friend to set aside these quadratic equations, these formulae, and try to transcend them a little—

Mr. Boateng: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Davies: In a moment. My hon. Friend has had 45 minutes. He made a theatrical speech, but who am I, as a member of the Bar, to complain about that either?

I ask my hon. Friend to set aside these quadratic equations and to exercise some ministerial discretion.

Mr. Boateng: I have enormously enjoyed my right hon. Friend's important contribution. If I may address him not as a member of the Bar, but as a former Treasury Minister—a distinguished former Treasury Minister—I must say that it is a little disingenuous to suggest that it is possible to put aside the equations and the formulae in the way that he suggests. He knows that a needs-based formula has winners and losers. Of course, it is sad when one's own authority is a loser, but I am sure that he will recognise the force of a needs-based formula of this sort.

Mr. Davies: I was coming to an end. I am sorry that my hon. Friend has raised the question of Treasury Ministers. I thought that he must have been a Treasury Minister when I heard parts of his speech. He said that money is bad for one; that one does not need any money. He implied that if we give more money, less crime will be detected. From the way that he spoke, I thought that my hon. Friend had done the tour d'horizon of the Treasury and was now back at the Home Office. Even former Treasury Ministers perhaps would not speak as he did. He told us we do not need money; we can become more efficient. That may be, but Dyfed-Powys is an efficient force. It now needs a little bit more money to make it more efficient in future and to reduce the crime level in my constituency.

2.44 pm

Sir David Madel (South-West Bedfordshire): This speech is a last minute appeal to the Minister to rebalance the settlement, which, as it is now constructed, leaves Bedfordshire in an extremely difficult position. But I start by thanking him and his civil servants for their courtesy and willingness to listen when we in Bedfordshire went to see them. They gave us plenty of time and we were grateful for the opportunity to put our case. One of the civil servants present was from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, and I shall say something about that later.

The Bedfordshire police force recognises that, in any settlement, there will be winners and losers, but we cannot understand why we have come off worst in the country. The increase for Bedfordshire is only 0.8 per cent. The national average is 2.7 per cent. But among our neighbouring counties, Cambridgeshire has had an increase of 3.9 per cent., Northampton 3.7 per cent. and Suffolk 4.1 per cent. They have thus had increases above the national average. I do not accept for a minute that those counties need increases so far ahead of Bedfordshire in order to deliver an acceptable level of policing.

Next door to us are Milton Keynes and Thames Valley with an increase of 2.4 per cent. That is certainly part of history. As always, Milton Keynes gets its good fair share of state spending, to the detriment of Bedfordshire. Why it wants to burst into Bedfordshire and take part of our area, I simply do not know, but this is the wrong debate for raising that.

If the 0.8 per cent. is turned into cash, it is £0.5 million. Given our pension problems, the salaries and the wage settlements, and the percentage that has to go on them, we cannot make a saving of £3.2 million without major manpower surgery, both officer and civilian. When we went to see him, the Minister listened carefully and courteously to the Unison representative from Bedfordshire who explained what effect the settlement would have on Unison members in Bedfordshire.

We were not sitting around in Bedfordshire last summer thinking, "Oh well, we'll get plenty of money." We were planning for a reduction: for a worst case scenario. We were planning for a £2 million reduction. Last summer, the authority started work identifying cuts and effecting efficiency savings, but in their wildest dreams, the police authority and those interested never imagined that the cut would be £3.2 million.

The unfairness of the settlement is deeply felt in Bedfordshire in view of the successes that we have had and have had recognised in the past two to three years by Her Majesty's inspectorate and the district auditor, as shown by the figures themselves.

The detection rate, which increased from 21 per cent. to 35 per cent., did not just happen—it was hard won. The primary detection rate now stands at 29 per cent., domestic burglary has been reduced by 25 per cent. and non-domestic burglary by 50 per cent. Motor vehicle crime has been reduced by 30 per cent. As the Minister knows, Luton rests on Vauxhall's ability to produce many cars, so we are a high car-owning county. The detection rate for motor vehicle crime has risen from 11 per cent. to 25 per cent. One could go on putting such figures to the Minister, but I know that he is familiar with them.

The Prime Minister said that success in policing would be rewarded. Alas, we have not had a reward. Those improvements have not been achieved by Bedfordshire police alone. The police-business partnership has been an example for the country—a fact that has been recognised by the National Lottery Charities Board. The partnership work extends to Homewatch, of which Bedfordshire is one of the leaders nationally, Victim Support and the Luton crime reduction partnership. The development of all those organisations in Bedfordshire is such that few opportunities exist for them to bid for additional funding, as they are so very far advanced.

The Minister will know of the Leighton Buzzard crime prevention panel. Leighton Buzzard, like all Bedfordshire towns, has a rapidly growing population. Leighton Buzzard's concern is that the cuts in the police budget are not self-contained but will have a knock-on effect on other areas involving partnership with the public.

Moreover, if the reward for increased effectiveness is reduced funding—the Bedfordshire police force was one of the most successful in the country last year at reducing and detecting crime—the willingness of individuals to take part in partnership activities may well be reduced. Morale is extremely important in voluntary activities. Without a good community spirit, it would be far easier

for members of the crime prevention panel to concentrate on purely local Homewatch affairs than to spend time on projects of benefit to the community as a whole. Community partnership needs to be fostered, and arbitrary cuts, apparently unrelated to proven increases in efficiency and effectiveness, are not the way to do that.

The immediate future for the Bedfordshire police authority and Bedfordshire police looks bleak, and there is a strong feeling that there has been a great deal of unfairness, given the circumstances that we are in. All we ask is to be treated as others have been treated and to be given equitable treatment.

An increase in council tax is not the way out of this problem. An increase of 2.5 per cent. in spend would be considered quite reasonable by people in Bedfordshire, but when they realise that, because of the peculiar gearing, that translates into a council tax increase of 16.5 per cent., they certainly will not be prepared to accept such an increase for one moment.

We are constrained by the gearing of the system: we cannot shove up council tax in order to continue the good work that we do with the police. I ask the Minister whether, even at this later hour, there could be some marginal relief for Bedfordshire this year or, at the very worst, whether a means could be found of spreading the reduction over a longer period.

I should say a word about the DETR official who was present at the meeting. We in Bedfordshire are doing what people in Hertfordshire, Northamptonshire and Buckinghamshire are doing; we are helping London with its housing. We do not have a standstill population, by any means. As the tragic deindustrialisation of Dunstable goes on, houses spring up like daffodils in April when the firms have gone, so we have to make police numbers keep pace with increases in population.

The Minister knows that. He once stood as a candidate for Hemel Hempstead which, as he also knows, is, to a great extent, about helping London with its housing. Londoners who move to Bedfordshire and to other places expect policing, and police numbers, to be as good as in London's. We in Bedfordshire are therefore somewhat puzzled at the Metropolitan police service's special payment, which has gone up by 16.5 per cent.

This is a terribly disappointing settlement and I am afraid that the Minister cannot match his great courtesy with some practical help and action for Bedfordshire. Let me give one fact and make one prediction. Here is the fact: between March 1979 and March 1997, police strength in Bedfordshire increased by 192, from 902 to 1,094; between March 1997 and September 1998, that strength fell by 43, from 1,094 to 1,051—backwards with Labour.

I remember when Labour activists, some of whom I see in the streets and some of whom come to my surgeries, ran around my constituency with propaganda leaflets saying, "You'll be safer under Labour. We'll do better on the police." They do not say that now; when I see them in the streets, they have a look of injured guilt on their faces because of what has happened.

I think that—deep, deep down—the Minister knows that we should have a better deal. I have given a fact, and I said that I would also make a prediction. Here it is: the headlines in the local papers in Bedfordshire in May will read, "Heavy losses for Labour in the local council elections." We will all know what has caused that.

2.53 pm

Ms Hazel Blears (Salford): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in the debate, because tackling the problems of crime and disorder is probably the No. 1 issue in Salford, the city that I represent. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) is about to leave the Chamber, so I say to him that I was absolutely amazed by his contribution, which was almost obsessed with numbers. The number that he failed to mention was the doubling of crime that he and the previous Conservative Government presided over during the past few years.

I invite the right hon. Gentleman to come to my city to witness the results of the Tory years. Crime and disorder have escalated almost out of control, people are often under siege and there has been a huge increase in burglary, robbery and violent crime. That is the legacy of the Tory Government, and his use of numbers was very selective indeed. We should concentrate not on numbers, but on how effective and efficient we are in providing policing.

I welcome the settlement. The national increase is 2.7 per cent., which will give us an extra £1.25 billion of expenditure over the next three years and will enable police forces to plan ahead. The ability to look ahead with regard to the needs of our communities, and to plan for the policing that will meet those needs, has been lacking.

Unlike Bedfordshire, the increase in Greater Manchester is slightly above the national average, at 2.9 per cent. I am delighted—*[Interruption.]* It is not a matter of luck. I am delighted that police resources are being targeted on the areas of greatest need. Resources will always be limited, but we need to target the resources that we have on the areas with the highest crime.

I speak for many Greater Manchester Members of Parliament when I say that we have been concerned about the way the budget process has proceeded in the past year. There have been a number of scare stories in the community that we faced budget cuts of £15 million or £18 million and that front-line policing would be slashed. Those stories have caused huge concern to the public, and a great deal of concern to the staff involved, but when the police authority examined its budget—rigorously and in detail—and got down to the nitty-gritty of where it was spending its money, it was able to make £10.5 million of efficiency savings.

The police authority told me yesterday that it will be able to live within the settlement, without any reductions in front-line operational policing. What matters to the people whom I represent is that the police are there, making the community safe. The authority proposes to restructure the tactical vehicle crime unit and to deliver off-road motor cycling facilities through other people. It has looked again at its cleaning and catering services, it has reviewed the traffic warden service and it has even restructured the mounted unit. I hope that nothing painful has been done to the horses.

That shows that, with imagination and creativity, we can reduce expenditure on services, but that need not affect the front-line policing of our communities. It shows what can be done, if we have the time to do it. The difficulty is that these things are done hastily, and not in the best way, when people budget from year to year or from month to month. The Audit Commission report estimates that this country could save up to £80 million

[Ms Hazel Blears]

in procurement, contracting, sharing training and sharing equipment if we thought about doing things in a different, more creative way.

This is new ground for many police authorities. They have not had to face the same pressures on their budgets as many local authorities have had to face over the past 20 years. It is a challenge for them to get down to the detail of their budgets and examine what they are spending their money on.

The Government, by introducing the best value scheme, are giving police authorities the tools to do the job. I am delighted that the Greater Manchester police area is piloting the best value scheme, and I am even more pleased that F division in Salford is one of the four target divisions where the scheme is moving on apace. The schemes are asking fundamental questions such as, "Should we be carrying out this function? How are we delivering the objectives that we want to achieve, and at what cost? How are our neighbours performing in each of these service areas and how can we ratchet up our performance to meet the standards of the very best?"

That is a methodical and rigorous approach. It has taken far too long for it to arrive, in terms of maximising the effectiveness of the money spent on policing. People in my community are crying out for more effective and more efficient policing that they are able to see in action. The best value scheme has smart objectives, which are supposed to be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timely. As well as smart objectives, I hope that we achieve some very smart policing in the city over the next few years.

We should also be asking some more fundamental questions about the role of the police. Should highly trained and expensive police officers be carrying out routine traffic duties such as monitoring speed traps, which we see around us every day? We should not shy away from such questions and it cannot be right that only the police can carry out certain sacrosanct functions. Provided that we have sufficient safeguards, and provided that we have thought the system through, we must be imaginative and open our minds to different ways of doing things.

Many of my constituents are absolutely enraged when they see six or seven police officers conducting an operation on illegal parking in an affluent part of our borough when they find it difficult to get the police to respond to violent incidents of crime and disorder in the inner city. We must look at our policing priorities. Should the police escort heavy loads on motorways? Should officers police football matches? Should they look after stray dogs or stray people who turn up on their doorstep? It is incumbent on us all to maximise the effect that we achieve from public expenditure, and the police should not be an exception.

The new powers in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 will be absolutely crucial in helping us to rebuild the safety of our communities. The new range of tools that we have under that Act—the anti-social behaviour orders, parenting orders and reparation orders—are key to rebuilding the inner cities. I fear, however, that unless we free up resources by analysing what we spend our money on now, we shall not have the money to implement the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 fully, and to obtain the maximum benefit from the new tools that are at our disposal.

I do not think that we can have "business as usual" in the police force. It must be said that, in some police forces, that simply is not working. Greater Manchester police are improving their detection rate, but they still detect only about 20 per cent. of crime; the national average is 26 per cent. The detection rate for burglary is only 11 per cent., while the national average is 17 per cent. It has risen in recent years, which shows the low base from which we are starting, but the fact remains that performance is not good enough. We must try to ratchet up standards, and ensure that we deliver high-quality services. Our ratio of police to public is higher than the national ratio, but I think that highlights the issue. We are talking not just about numbers, but about how those involved are working, the operations in which they are engaged and how those operations are managed and monitored. That is what delivers the return for our investment.

I want to mention a couple of innovations in F division in Salford which I consider very exciting. The first pathfinder initiative for the new operational policing strategy involves taking officers out of headquarters and on to the streets, and making them take "ownership" of their neighbourhoods. A sergeant and six police officers are now dedicated to each of our neighbourhoods. They have a personal responsibility for every rise in crime; as for reductions in crime, they have a stake in the results that they are able to achieve. That could almost be described as a revolution in policing. The community now sets the priorities, and the police—along with their local-authority, business and voluntary-sector partners—help to deliver what is required. That is the sort of high-value, high-quality policing that we want, and this Government are helping us to achieve it.

Salford has just been allocated part of the burglary initiative moneys that will protect the most vulnerable people in my community. Some 4 per cent. of people in this country are victims of 42 per cent. of recorded crime, which is shocking. People in inner cities, and in constituencies such as mine, suffer a hugely disproportionate amount of crime. Measures such as the burglary initiative, which is intended to make their homes and communities safer, can help to protect them.

Today's debate is about spending our money wisely and well. In that context, I feel compelled to bring to the Minister's attention an important issue that has come to light in Greater Manchester over the past week. It has featured in our local newspaper, the *Manchester Evening News*, and apparently, for the past 12 months the Audit Commission has been investigating it—investigating, that is, alleged mismanagement and waste involving important contracts in the Greater Manchester police area.

It is alleged that the construction of the new crime squad headquarters at Bradford park in Manchester has exceeded its budget by £3 million; that it was necessary to tear out inappropriate equipment, which has cost a further half a million pounds; and that expensive consultants were engaged at a cost of £1.5 million, without compliance with European tendering procedures. All that is of great concern to the people of Greater Manchester.

We are hard pressed enough to need to secure good value from our expenditure. If there is any question of waste or mismanagement in the police force, I ask the Minister to investigate, and ensure that appropriate action is taken. Yesterday I spoke to the chair of the police

authority, who gave me an undertaking that the police authority would act swiftly and decisively, and that there would be full and public debate as soon as possible. These matters must not be covered up; they must be properly exposed and investigated.

Finally, let me raise one or two long-term issues that the Government must address if we are to continue to make progress in the policing of our area. The first is police pensions. I know that it affects everyone in the country, but I must point out that, in 1986, police pensions in Greater Manchester cost £12.7 million—7.6 per cent. of the total budget. This year, the cost has risen to the astronomical figure of £59.2 million, 16 per cent. of the budget. That is a doubling in real terms, and constitutes a huge amount to find.

We also need to review the reasons for many retirements and pension increases, to manage sicknesses and medical retirements, and to ensure that our police forces are monitoring such developments as rigorously as possible. Given that pension costs are likely to rise by another £8 million next year, and by a further £10 million the year after that, the issue is clearly important.

The second issue is the renewal of the public communications system in Greater Manchester. At present, we use local wavelengths, which costs us about half a million pounds. In future, there is to be a nationally imposed system. I understand that the annual running cost will be about £8 million, and that the capital cost has been estimated at about £22 million. Those are large sums for a police authority to find. I understand that our police authority will be asking for a meeting with Ministers in the next few months to discuss some of the larger-term issues, and I hope that it will be possible to arrange such a meeting. Another issue that concerns us is the policing of the Commonwealth games in Manchester.

As I said at the outset, nothing is more important to the people of Salford than effective, efficient policing that will help to provide a safe community. Certainly, today's settlement will help my police authority to establish the necessary structure. The requirements are demanding and challenging, but they do not come before time. We must ensure that the police, like everyone else, provide value for money, and that we obtain the maximum return for every investment that we make.

The Government have said that there will be extra funds, but it is something for something, not something for nothing. We must ensure that we deliver efficiency, effectiveness and value for money—and then the Government will support the police. We are determined to tackle the Tory legacy of crime and lawlessness in our cities. The statistic that we should never forget is this: crime doubled under the Tory Government, and that is what we must deal with now.

3.6 pm

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): This is a short debate on a big subject. I am especially pleased to follow the hon. Member for Salford (Ms Blears), who always manages to deliver a large amount of information in a relatively short time. I am particularly pleased that the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) did not manage to escape without being given his share. I certainly agree with the hon. Lady's sentiments with regard to the last Government's performance, although I disagree with her about the nature of the settlement. I shall say more about that later. I accept that she is sincere in wanting better policing in her area, but I do not believe that the settlement will lead to that.

I had hoped to return upstairs with the Minister and others for some more gentle consideration of sexual offences, but I understand that is now not going to happen—although we shall not have any more time for our debate in the Chamber. [*Laughter.*] When I say "upstairs", I mean "in Committee". I am glad that the debate so far has not become too partisan, except in regard to police numbers. I am not ashamed of my wish to dwell on that issue, as it is a key issue for my colleagues and me. The number of police officers has fallen by 781 since the general election, and we predict a further fall of at least 500 over the coming years following our analysis of the facts and of the implications of settlements under the last Government.

I was interested to learn that the Minister now believes that arguments about numbers are sterile and simplistic. I assume that they were not sterile and simplistic when they were employed by Labour spokesmen in opposition. I am thinking in particular of the current Secretary of State for Wales who, as recently as 1996, used similar arguments against the Tory Government.

The Government certainly deserve praise in one respect: they have learnt lessons from previous political mistakes. They decided not to make any commitment on numbers, because they saw what political difficulties that would cause. We heard a bizarre argument from the Minister about the Home Secretary's powers to dictate or not. He seemed to want a return to the former position—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps I misunderstood. He seemed to want to disclaim responsibility because he no longer had the power, but did not go as far as committing himself to taking the power back.

We find ourselves in a looking-glass situation. I think that, if my mathematics is correct, it would be possible to spin the Chamber round 180 degrees to hear arguments opposite to those advanced in 1995 and 1996, before the change of Government, from hon. Members on both sides of the House. What we have learnt in this debate is that, while the Conservatives tried to increase police numbers and failed abjectly, the current Labour Government are simply refusing to make any commitment to increase them.

Sir Norman Fowler: The hon. Gentleman speaks of abject failure. Does he deny that, under the last Conservative Government, police numbers increased by 15,300?

Mr. Allan: I was referring to the period between 1992 and 1997, which is recent enough to judge the performance of the previous Government.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Having been a chairman of a police authority during the period of the previous Government, having gone every year to the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) to say that we needed more police in Avon and Somerset, and having received every year the answer, "No," may I corroborate the points that my hon. Friend makes? Police numbers did fall.

Mr. Allan: That is true. In 1992, the previous Government made a clear commitment, of which the

[Mr. Allan]

Labour party in opposition enjoyed reminding them at the time, that they would increase police numbers by 1,000 over their period in office; they fell by 500. It is fair to say that that commitment was broken.

Perhaps one of the most amusing pieces of evidence that we have had in the debate was the Home Office press release that talked about a "fair and challenging settlement", which is a triumph of the spin doctors' art. "Challenging" is not the adjective that would have been used by Labour in opposition to describe the settlement. In essence, challenging means that it will be extremely difficult for police forces to meet their targets with the settlement. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield has already referred to the Police Federation. Other organisations do not describe the settlement as challenging. They use much stronger language.

I should like the Minister to confirm a point of detail, if that is possible; she can certainly do so in her winding-up speech. We have examined the figures and believe that they represent an increase for this year of only £176 million, with the extra £10 million that has been factored into the Home Office press release being forms of grant other than police standard spending.

We believe that that gives an inflated impression of the settlement, which we calculate represents an increase in real terms of only 0.001 per cent—1,000th of 1 per cent.—not the 0.1 per cent. real-terms increase that the £186 million figure would give. Again, there has been manipulation to make the settlement appear better than it is.

When we look at the next few years of settlements, the picture is no rosier. Although the comprehensive spending review is trumpeted in many other service sectors, it does not give a particularly good deal to the police. As I have said, our estimate is that, over the coming years, police numbers will fall yet further under the figures in the CSR.

Mr. Brake: Is my hon. Friend aware that, yesterday, Sir Paul Condon estimated that Metropolitan police numbers would probably fall by about 100 in the next year?

Mr. Allan: As we all know, the Met has taken the brunt of the cuts so far. That further cut will come when we are trying to introduce new measures. We have heard evidence of the things that have happened in New York, where they have been able to increase police numbers and succeed in their aims. It will worry all Londoners to hear that further cuts in the Met are forecast.

We have looked at the things that the police force will face in coming years and will have to cope with. Policing the millennium will obviously be a one-off in the next year, but the pensions issue is an on-going problem. As yet, there is no sign of an ultimate solution. So long as it remains unresolved, it will continue to hit police budgets. I understand that the auditors have expressed significant concern about the level of police budget reserves because they have been spending over and above what they should—in particular, to meet the costs of pensions.

The ability to put in new information technology systems is important. I was interested to hear the Minister refer to his visit to Stonehouse in Gloucestershire to look at some of them, but the response from the chief constable of Gloucestershire police in a letter to my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Mr. Jones) does not paint such a rosy picture on what it is able to do. He says:

"The latest settlement is a very tough one for the Gloucestershire Constabulary. We have been allocated substantially less money than we had feared we would be allocated."

He says that there are severe funding problems in Gloucestershire, so at the same time as we hear praise for those exciting new initiatives—we all want to see them happen and succeed—practitioners on the ground tell us that it is a difficult settlement. We have to ask how far they can continue to innovate given such funding pressures.

We are concerned about the transfer of costs from central Government to the local taxpayer. Again, the Labour party in opposition was robust on the issue, accusing the previous Government of a con when they announced settlements that increased the standard spending assessment for the police, but kept the police grant increase relatively low, so that the costs were passed on to the taxpayer.

Again, the chief constable of Gloucestershire police says that it will need a significant increase in its council tax contribution in the precepts—he talks about a 22 per cent. increase—to recover all the funds, which it is entitled to do. The Government need to be more explicit about who is actually paying for the settlement and about the fact that there will be an increase in taxation locally, which should not be hidden by the fact that they can say that general taxation nationally has not been increased, so taxes have not gone up. The Conservatives tried local tax increases year on year, and the Labour party in opposition rightly attacked them for it, yet we hear silence on the issue when it comes to this year's settlement.

I refer to those who have criticised the settlement. The Association of Chief Police Officers was robust on the issue:

"Let's be realistic. Government cannot expect any public service, least of all the police, with their wide responsibilities, to meet all the public's expectations with such a shortfall. Law and order is a high public priority. This settlement means the Service may have to cut back its front-line services."

The association is not talking about administration or back-room staff. I do not think that it is talking about traffic wardens putting tickets on cars. It is talking about front-line policing services. ACPO believes that cuts there may be the consequence of the settlement.

Again, the Association of Police Authorities, which does much work in the sector, has been clear about its view:

"The overall national increase of 2.75 per cent. in police spending is less than half what the APA calculates forces need to maintain their present levels of service."

With all the pressures that I have talked about, forces need twice the settlement that they have been given. Costs that simply cannot be avoided—police pay and pensions—are not covered by the latest settlement. The Association of Police Authorities, which has to set the budgets and which has the greatest in-depth knowledge of how police budgets work, is making a clear statement that the settlement is not enough.

The police have a vital role to play in fighting both crime and the fear of crime. We have been clear about the role of police officers on the beat in combating fear of crime. We believe that the Government share our

objective of combating fear of crime. We wholeheartedly support some of the developments recently through the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, local policing audits—the crime audits—and local community safety plans, which are wonderful innovations, but we want the police to have the resources to implement them. Our greatest fear is that public expectation has been built up by the Government and that the Government are prepared to will the ends but not the means to support the police. On that basis, we feel unable to support the police settlement.

3.17 pm

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): I wish to raise an issue of general public importance that was touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Ms Blears), but in respect of a more specific example. The issue is how police authorities account to the public for the way in which they spend their money and how transparently they do so.

The example involves South Yorkshire police and the on-going reverberations following the Hillsborough disaster, which happened almost 10 years ago; I am sorry that they are still going on, but they are. This is a matter of great importance to the people of Merseyside and my constituents, even though it relates to the South Yorkshire police authority; it also illustrates the more general point of public interest that I wish to raise.

A number of my constituents are families bereaved as a result of the Hillsborough disaster. I know that they feel that, after all this time, the full truth of what happened has still not emerged. They feel that they have still not had the answers to all the questions that they have raised and that they have never received justice.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady, but she may be labouring under a misapprehension as to the scope of the order, which is confined to consideration of the size and distribution of the grants that are proposed in the report before the House. I am not sure that she can extend quite into the area that she thought she might.

Maria Eagle: I hope that I can, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am aware of the scope of the order. Of course, I will be guided by you, if you feel that I cannot, but I felt that I needed to set scene. I wish to discuss the way in which South Yorkshire police authority is spending its grant and the value for money that that spending represents. If you wish, I could move straight on to that, although, without a little background. hon. Members may find it a little more difficult to follow my points. Obviously, I am willing to be guided by you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I understand what the hon. Lady is saying, but she must keep within the spirit and scope of the debate. She can give a short preface to the point, but then I must require her to come well within the terms of the order.

Maria Eagle: I am grateful for your advice, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Following the scrutiny of the evidence surrounding the Hillsborough disaster, a vast volume of documentation was placed in the Library. As a result of information arising out of that documentation, the families of the victims decided that they wanted to conduct some private prosecutions of retired officers, Mr. Duckenfield and Mr. Murray, of South Yorkshire police—now long retired. I want to raise the way in which the defence of those cases is being funded by South Yorkshire police, whether it is transparent and whether it is an effective use of money.

Those two defendants have the same rights to a proper defence as anyone else accused of criminal offences, funded publicly if that is necessary. The legal aid fund exists to facilitate just such cases. Also, I have no objection to the general policy operated by most police authorities. They take the view that it is proper to spend some of the money allocated to them in their grant to fund, in appropriate circumstances, the defence of police officers accused of criminal offences. I am aware that there is Home Office guidance in relation to just that issue, considering when and whether funding of that nature should be provided. It is for the chief constable to decide whether it should. We can all think of circumstances in which the funds should be provided—for example, when an officer is accused of a criminal assault when making an arrest and is then pursued by private prosecution. There are some clear cases on which we could all agree, but there are some circumstances in which the money should not be provided.

In this case, the officers concerned retired on health grounds. In one case there were serious outstanding disciplinary offences and, in the other, the disciplinary offences were dropped because of the retirement of the other officer. The officers concerned and the force were severely criticised by Lord Taylor in the public inquiry following the disaster. He said that the main cause of the disaster was a loss of police control.

As a result of the retirements, nobody within the police force was ever held to account for that loss of control. That is one of the main reasons why the families concerned still feel a grievance.

I recognise that some hon. Members may disagree with me and that there are arguments on both sides about whether funding should be forthcoming, even though we may all agree that there are some circumstances in which it should. If there is a decision to provide funding in such a case, it has implications. The funding as it appears to have been granted in this case is without limit. The force has made it clear that it intends to fund the defence right through to the final trial. The funding has been provided without proper review or checks for value for money being put in place. It seems to have priority over all other policing issues. The many members of the Bar who were referred to earlier could attest to the fact that the final cost could be millions of pounds. I am not exaggerating. I am not a member of the Bar, but—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I have given the hon. Lady enough scope. She must now come to the substance of the matter before the House, which is the size and distribution of the grant to police forces for the coming year.

Maria Eagle: My point is that, potentially, millions of pounds could be spent on those cases with no checks having been put in place, despite the fact that South Yorkshire police authority has written to the Home Office in respect of the adequacy of its funding for the coming year.

[Maria Eagle]

I have a written answer which suggests that there has been a letter from the clerk to the South Yorkshire police authority raising a number of issues about the proposed funding settlement for the following year. That is in spite of the fact that the funds seem to have been provided without any proper checks or balances.

I wrote to ask about any checks being placed on the potential spending by South Yorkshire police authority. I asked what procedures the authority and the force had put in place to ensure that the funds were spent appropriately and to ensure that they represented good value for money. I asked when the arrangements would be reviewed, given the open-ended nature of the commitment. I received a reply from the assistant chief constable which referred me to the clerk and treasurer of the police authority. Unfortunately, the reply from the police authority answers none of the questions that I raised.

I hope that the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (K[illegible] Hoey) will be able to refer to my points, at least in part, in her reply to the debate. Can she tell me how the Government can be assured that the police authority is spending its money appropriately and achieving value for money, since it has undertaken such an open-ended commitment while seeking further funds from the Government in order to carry out its basic duty, which is to provide policing services to south Yorkshire?

3.25 pm

Mr. John Horam (Orpington): My constituency featured heavily in the Christmas television schedules in relation to crime and the police because the Christmas edition of the long-running and excellent series "The Bill" was shot on Orpington high street. If that was the only connection that my constituency had with the police, my constituents and I would be delighted. My constituents were thrilled to have the leading actors in the high street for quite some time.

Of course, even in leafy Orpington, there is theft, burglary, violence and bad behaviour, as there is in every other constituency in the country. My constituents have been extremely concerned about the number of recent incidents, and many elderly residents, in particular, are concerned about the level of crime.

I have two concerns. First, after several years of real progress in combating crime in Orpington and Bromley more generally, that great improvement seems to be being reversed. The figures for last year, which have only just been released, show an increase in crime, even in the Bromley division of the London area. It is a matter of great concern that things have suddenly begun to unravel in entirely the wrong direction.

Se[illegible]ndly, police resources to deal with the increase in crime are being cut. As we know, the settlement for the Metropolitan division shows a cash increase of 1.7 per cent. That is not much for a cash increase. The real figure shows a substantial decrease after taking into account necessary increases in salaries, pensions and so on. We are facing not stability, as mentioned by the right hon. Member for Llanelli (Mr. Davies), but a decrease in the provision for my area.

This year—not just next year—the manpower available to the Bromley division decreased by 10. Over London as a whole, the number of police has decreased by 571 since the general election. During the debate, the Liberal Democrat spokesman said that it is expected to decline by a further 100 over the next 12 months. My hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) pointed out in an article in the *Evening Standard* only yesterday that the age profile of the Metropolitan police is such that the number leaving the force over the next few years will increase considerably. That, too, poses a potential crisis in London. All those factors are having an effect and are damaging people's confidence in the ability of the police to deal with crime effectively.

There has been a major reorganisation in my area over the past two or three years. It is not a question of efficiency having been ignored and now suddenly being taken into account. That reorganisation affected all sectors of my constituency and Bromley more generally and we hoped that it would lead to more efficient situation for the police in which they could settle down and operate for some time with no further exhortations to reorganise even more.

This is a short debate and we will not all get an opportunity to speak. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) want to be associated with my remarks.

The current situation, together with the new settlement, will lead to a further reduction in the number of police in the Bromley area. We expect to lose another 10 officers in addition to the 10 that will have been lost by the end of March. Moreover, we are facing the possible closure of four police stations. We believe that two of those police stations, one in my constituency at Biggin Hill and one in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, are almost certain to close. Furthermore, we expect additional police station closures, including one in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham and another in my own constituency, at St. Mary Cray.

The possibility of closing the St. Mary Cray station is very distressing, as it was opened in only 1992, after a long public campaign by me, the local newspaper and local councillors, to their credit. So, in 1992, we managed to obtain a new police station at St. Mary Cray; seven years later, we are faced with the closure of that self-same station. Closures are possible even in Bromley, which has hitherto been in a well-resourced part of London.

The Minister will understand the dismay with which Opposition Members are greeting the Government's proposed settlement. Under the previous, Conservative Government, police resources, new police stations and police numbers all increased. Now, within 18 months of a Labour Government being elected, we are faced with the possibility of four police station closures, fewer police officers and an increase in crime. That is the reality facing Bromley.

I am concerned also about the effect of the Government's changes on the community's institutional structures supporting efforts to deal with crime. As the Minister rightly said, fighting crime is a matter not only for police but for local authorities and local people. The effort to develop community action has been made faithfully for many years, at the behest of successive Governments, and has done well in Bromley.

The focus of efforts to build a partnership in Bromley has been the Bromley police-community liaison group, which meets regularly. I attend its meetings, as do, my

colleagues, local councillors and local people. The mood at its meetings has been grim. I received a report of the most recent meeting from a resident whom I know well, who is a responsible and public-minded person who does not reach judgments lightly. He said that

"Overall the members of the public are not happy with the way the Group runs."

He was referring to the liaison group, and continued:

"While the police listen to what is said, there is seldom any sort of positive response which we would like . . . It seems that all we can look forward to is a continually diminishing police force even less able to enforce all the laws and discharge matters which they, and no one else, currently have responsibility for."

The liaison group notes, among other things, that people are less willing than they were to turn out for consultative meetings. People no longer see the point of the meetings, at which police listen politely and all local concerns are voiced, but after which nothing happens. Police, quite frankly, say that they do not have the resources to respond to local concerns. That is the reality of life on the ground floor.

I can only say to the Minister that the situation in my constituency paints a grim picture that does not offer much hope. I strongly support my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) in opposing the motion.

3.33 pm

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): In last year's police grant debate—in which I was, I think, the only Front Bencher now in the Chamber to participate—I warned that the Government's failure to provide adequate resources for our police service would result in fewer officers. We are now beginning to see the full realisation of that prediction.

Since 1 May 1997, there are 780 fewer police officers. The hon. Member for Salford (Ms Blears) seemed to think that police numbers declined under the Tories. The fact is that the Greater Manchester force gained 500 more police officers during the Tory's 18 years in office. Now—already, since the general election—it has 30 fewer officers.

The number of police officers leaving the police service grows daily, and those officers are not being replaced. My hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam) reminded us in his speech of the problems in the Metropolitan police.

The settlement will make matters significantly worse. Clearly, a 2.7 per cent. increase is nowhere near enough to maintain the police service. Moreover, all police organisations are making the same gloomy forecast. As the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan) reminded us, two months ago, the Association of Chief Police Officers warned that a 6.1 per cent. funding increase was necessary for police forces simply to maintain current services. I should remind the hon. Gentleman of how well his own police force, in South Yorkshire, did during the Conservatives' years in government, when that force increased by 600 officers.

Chief constables have rightly questioned the basis for the Government's demand for 2 per cent. efficiency savings, whereas the independent Audit Commission—which the Minister prayed in aid—found scope for savings of only 0.25 per cent. Police superintendents are predicting significant manpower reductions—of thousands, not hundreds of officers. Across the country, one has only to tot up the manpower levels that police forces predict they will have in a year's time to realise that we are talking about manpower reductions of thousands, not hundreds, of officers.

It is predicted that, by the end of this year, North Yorkshire will have 50 fewer police officers. North Yorkshire police comprise 1 per cent. of the police service. If its cuts were repeated across the country, there would indeed be 5,000 fewer officers nationally.

It is predicted that there will be 100 fewer officers at Thames Valley police, which comprise just under 3 per cent. of the police service. A similar cut made nationally would entail 3,000 fewer officers.

Police superintendents have branded the settlement as

"the worst spending round in a generation".

The grant shows a complete lack of political commitment to the police and demonstrates that police are not one of the Government's priorities. Ministers have the cheek to challenge us about providing resources to police. Special advisers, focus groups and lavish parties for pop stars at No. 10 Downing street are the Government's priorities, as are the more than 180 new task forces that the Government have established. Ministerial office refurbishments are the Government's priority, as is so much overseas travel by Ministers that some Ministers are refusing to answer questions about it, as we saw today. But the Government do not include the police service among their priorities.

The Government are running down the police service—but why? What is the plan? Will beat officers be replaced, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) asked earlier, by neighbourhood wardens? Will unemployed people be recruited to patrol local estates, with powers to intervene and arrest? The police service is predicting that that may happen.

Mr. Boateng: Nonsense.

Mr. Greenway: The police service is making such predictions to Opposition Members. It is what we have been told by Surrey's chief constable, the other Mr. Blair.

Did the public vote for such changes? They were never asked about any such proposals. In her reply, perhaps the Minister will tell us the Government's hidden agenda. Surely Ministers cannot fail to notice the effects of their policies and mismanagement on the numbers of serving police officers.

The Association of Police Authorities questioned how a cash increase of £186 million can pay for spending commitments of £438 million. Pay and pension costs alone will rise by £250 million. The fact is that the resources of 10 police authorities will grow by less than 2 per cent., and that they will face a stark choice between cuts in police numbers or a massive hike in council tax precepts—or both: fewer police at greater cost.

The right hon. Member for Llanelli (Mr. Davies) reminded us of the plight of one of our smallest police forces, in Dyfed Powys, in west Wales, which has barely more than 1,000 police officers.

[Mr. Greenway]

The police authorities that will be worst affected by the settlement will be those that have already had a shake-out and made savings. How are they supposed to make further savings?

The cuts will not be painless for anyone. As my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington said, police stations will close across south-east London. Cumbria—which is another of our smallest police forces—will close 10 stations. People may say, "Those will be mostly rural beat houses, which went in North Yorkshire more than 10 years ago." The Minister may think that that is the right approach, but it is not popular and results in a serious diminution of service.

Some forces have already stripped out large numbers of senior ranks. There has been a reduction of approximately one in four ACPO ranks across the country, with 700 fewer superintendents in the past six or seven years. I am glad that the Minister agrees with that. As he told us earlier, a flattening out of the rank structure in the police service is needed. However, he should read the report of last year's debate. When I pointed that out to his predecessor, the right hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael), he bluntly disagreed.

The Government are trying to have it both ways. It is on the record in *Hansard* that there was an increase of 2,300 in the number of constables between 1992 and 1997, but the Government and the Liberal Democrats trot out the statistic that the number of officers fell by 500. Of course that is the case, because 2,700 senior ranks were stripped out. Any further pressure for efficiency savings will result in fewer officers.

Much of the restructuring that happened in the 1990s was a direct consequence of giving greater freedom to chief constables to manage their resources. The Minister could not tell us whether he agreed with that. Chief constables were enabled to do what was best for their force and their local needs. The Government have triggered off a frantic scramble to meet the straitjacket imposed by the requirement for 2 per cent. efficiency savings year on year, regardless of circumstances. The scope for saving varies from force to force, yet all must meet the same 2 per cent. target regardless.

How will delivery of the 2 per cent. efficiency savings be judged? If it is not manpower-related, how else? Some 80 per cent. of police funding is spent on staff costs, most of which funds police activity. With very few exceptions, the police are unable to measure policing activity. How will years two and three be measured? How will the financial sanctions threatened by the Home Secretary work? They will be a double blow for already hard-pressed local communities, whose police force will be penalised. Given how much police spending goes on paying officers, is it any wonder that staff associations are questioning the Government's intentions on pay? Rumours are rife throughout the police service that the Government are set to renege on the pay formula that has lasted for 20 years. Will the Minister take the opportunity of this debate to give them some reassurance and deny the rumour?

Memories of the collapse of police morale under the Labour Governments of the late 1960s and 1970s have been rekindled by the Government's obvious lack of commitment to the police service.

Mr. Boateng: Get real.

Mr. Greenway: The Minister should go and talk to the police service. I did so yesterday and was told—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The Minister should not speak from a sedentary position.

Mr. Greenway: Summing up the feelings of the police service, a serving officer told me that morale was at rock bottom and spiralling downwards. The House should take seriously the real danger of a demoralised police force. The only gainers from that will be the criminals, while the general public will be the losers—the people who were taken in by the language of the Prime Minister when he was shadow Home Secretary. They are beginning to see that "Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime" was a slogan for opposition, but not a policy for government.

Being tough on crime under Labour means releasing prisoners early to reoffend within 24 hours. We have warned for 18 months that that would happen. The Minister shakes his head, but it is happening. A prisoner released under tagging has reoffended within 24 hours. It is clear that he should never have been released.

What about being tough on the causes of crime? The settlement shows that that has turned into being tough on the people who fight crime. The Government's comprehensive spending review, which lies behind the settlement, has resulted in a comprehensive betrayal of the police. By voting against the motion, we shall be urging the Government to think again.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield reminded us, four years ago, when the Home Secretary was the shadow Home Secretary, he sought to justify voting against the police grant settlement because he said that some police forces would have to cut numbers. That year the Government gave an increase in grant of nearly £295 million—50 per cent. more than the current Government say is acceptable. The Home Secretary's words should haunt him when we vote against the settlement. We shall do so, not just to register the deep-seated concerns of the police service, but because we believe that the people of this country do not want the police service to be cut to the bone.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), the former Prime Minister, said just two afternoons ago that the Prime Minister was a prisoner of the mob mentality. The public have yet to realise the damage that the Government are doing to our police service. When they do, they will hold the Prime Minister responsible. Perhaps then Ministers may come to the House to announce a better settlement for our police.

3.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kate Hoey): This has been an interesting and informative debate, although it has been slightly heated at times from the contributions of those on the Opposition Front Bench. We have heard a wide range

of contributions, giving many examples of good practice in police forces throughout the country. This is an opportunity for right hon. and hon. Members from across England and Wales to make their views known, as is right and proper. They are close to their local police force. They know what their officers are thinking and want to make those views known. I should like to respond to the questions that have been raised.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kate Hoey: Not just at the moment. Let me get some way into my speech. I do not have a lot of time.

The support for local police forces should not always be uncritical. It was interesting to hear some hon. Members recognise that perhaps the police had been insulated from the pressure that has been put on other parts of the public sector.

The figures in the report represent a fair settlement for the police in 1999-2000—fair but challenging. We have heard about the financial pressures that individual police authorities are facing. I fully accept that some authorities have fared better than others. That is one of the effects of the funding formula that we inherited from the Conservatives. We continue to refine it and it now commands general acceptance in the police service. It is based on the relative needs of forces, so those faring less well can be reassured that a disappointing settlement in comparison with that of a neighbouring force is down to objective evidence, not the whim of Ministers.

We have allowed the formula to operate objectively without political interference or tinkering and resisted the temptation to interfere with it or override it to produce results that Ministers might find more attractive for their area. The Metropolitan police—my local force and that of my hon. Friend the Minister—will get a funding increase of 1.7 per cent. next year, which is well below the national average. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's local police in Lancashire will get a funding increase of 1.9 per cent., which is again below the average. We have been scrupulous in avoiding subjective intervention in allocations to individual police authorities.

The funding provided by central Government is not the end of the story. Forces will have more money at their disposal if they improve their performance and efficiency. Efficiency savings of 2 per cent. across total police authority spending represent about £140 million in cash terms—a significant sum by any standard. As we have heard already, the Audit Commission and Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary have pointed to areas where significant improvements can be made, including better management of sickness or medical retirements and better use of assets. Changes in the rules on capital receipts mean that, for the first time, police authorities can reinvest in capital projects all that they generate from the sale of surplus assets.

Police authorities can also consider increasing their spending a little more through the council tax. Unlike in previous years, they are not constricted by crude and universal capping limits.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: The Minister will be aware that the Gloucestershire police had one of the lowest settlements—an increase of only 1.4 per cent. Recently, the chief constable wrote to me saying that, in real terms, that represents a cut of 4 per cent. in its budget and that making that up fully would involve an increase in the council tax precept for the police of a staggering 27 per cent. I have written to the Minister—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has pushed the boat out too far.

Kate Hoey: If the hon. Gentleman has written to me, I certainly have not received his letter. However, only yesterday, my hon. Friend the Minister met the deputy chief constable, who is quite confident that the police will be able to manage on this year's difficult but challenging settlement.

As I mentioned, there will be no capping. However, the Home Secretary expects police authorities to balance the needs of the force for extra resources with the interests of local council tax payers and set budgets that are responsible, prudent and do not impose excessive increases in council tax. The Home Secretary has asked me to point out that we shall be monitoring the position closely.

Another innovation for next year is the link between the settlement and our commitment to improving police efficiency. We have set all police forces a target of 2 per cent. efficiency gains year on year. They will then be able to plough the money back into front-line policing. Hon. Members should understand that, for the first time, there is a real incentive to meet this modest target.

Mr. Allan: The Minister gave us an assurance that in setting the budget using the formula, no account was taken of the political make-up of a particular area. Can she give us the same assurance in respect of the capping process—that the political complexion of an area will not affect the Government's consideration of whether or not to lift a cap?

Kate Hoey: I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman should even think that there is any political consideration in the capping formula.

I shall now respond to some of the specific points that were raised in the debate. My right hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Mr. Davies)—I have been practising pronouncing the name of his constituency, but I am not sure whether I have got it right—talked about his local police force in Dyfed Powys. He made an interesting speech, but he did not mention that his local police force has the lowest crime rate in the country and should be congratulated. It also has the highest percentage of crimes detected, and that is an excellent achievement. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales, the previous Home Office Minister, listened to the concerns of the four Welsh forces and found additional money for them. As a result, the Dyfed-Powys force will receive an increase of 1.2 per cent. instead of 0.8 per cent. and that is a positive step. My right hon. Friend also asked about the 2 per cent. efficiency target. If his force were to achieve that target, it would have an extra £1 million to reinvest.

The hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Sir D. Madel) gave us a sincere presentation of the particular difficulties affecting Bedfordshire that he has discussed with my hon Friend the Minister of State. Bedfordshire has achieved success in fighting crime, although it has

[Kate Hoey]

been affected by the formula. As I said, a formula means that some forces fare worse than others. However, the formula is based on population. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the extra housing that is being built in his area. The formula is population based and so there is no doubt that any increase in the population will be reflected in the allocation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Ms Blears) made a positive speech recognising that police forces sometimes need to be challenged. She raised questions about how the police work and whether more imaginative ways of working—and indeed the role of the police—should be examined. She saw what the Opposition did not see—that there needs to be a change in culture and we all have to work with the police to bring that about. Clearly, if there is mismanagement we shall look into it as it is a serious issue.

As she has done on many occasions, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) referred to Hillsborough. I do not want to get into that now, but she asked how we measure whether police grant has been used appropriately. That is a matter for the police authority and the district auditor.

The hon. Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam) painted a grim picture of his area. I do not agree. There has been some exaggeration and I am absolutely confident that his area will respond to the settlement.

I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House agree that tackling crime is not a job for the police alone. In many areas the police are already working in co-operation with local authorities and others to reduce crime. The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 has provided the police with new powers and opportunities. Working with the local community, they are able to focus responses and target local crime problems. The police are already doing an excellent job. The legislation means that crime can be tackled at its roots, in local communities. The police have a major part to play in that work.

The settlement provides the police service with extra resources to carry on its excellent work in tackling crime and disorder in our towns and cities. It includes efficiency targets that will enable forces to focus their resources on meeting the concerns of local people. The Audit Commission report shows that success in solving crime does not depend solely in the numbers of police officers available. Partnerships, targeted policing, better use of information technology and the efficient use of available resources all have an important part to play in improving police performance.

Both Opposition spokesmen were full of doom and gloom, particularly the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway). However, police authorities across the country do not share that view. I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government have no hidden agenda. Our only agenda is to tackle crime effectively. I know that the Opposition have a job to do, but I genuinely wish that they would work with us on that agenda to tackle crime and disorder because that is what the public want. The Government are confident that the police will rise to the challenge—it is a challenge—and show the public that they can deliver an effective, efficient and high-quality service. That is what we expect to happen, so we should like the House to support the settlement today.

Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 282, Noes 143.

Division No. 57] **[3.59 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fatchett, Derek
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jenkins, Brian

Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Kevin Hughes and
Mr. David Jamieson.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cotter, Brian
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Oliver Heald and
Mr. Stephen Day.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Police Grant Report (England and Wales) 1999–2000 (HC 179), which was laid before this House on 1st February, be approved.

Local Government Finance

4.11 pm

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): I beg to move,

That the Local Government Finance Report (England) 1999–2000 (HC 143), which was laid before this House on 1st February, be approved.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following motions:

That the Local Government Finance (England) Special Grant Report (No. 37) (HC 144), which was laid before this House on 1st February, be approved.

That the Local Government Finance Report (England) 1997–98: Amending Report 1999 (HC 145), which was laid before this House on 1st February, be approved.

I should remind the House that Madam Speaker has ruled that there will be a limit of 10 minutes on Back-Bench speeches.

Mr. Prescott: As this is to be a shorter debate than last year's, and as many hon. Members will wish to take part, I shall keep my remarks as brief as possible.

This year's settlement is the most generous for seven years, so it should not be too controversial—although I recognise that the settlement is never, ever enough. The House will recall that on 2 December, I set out my local government finance settlement proposals for England in 1999-2000. They included: the total amount of local authority spending to which the Government are prepared to contribute, known as total standard spending, which will increase from £48 billion to more than £50.5 billion, which is a rise of £2.6 billion, or 5.5 per cent.; the amount of Government grant support, which increases from £37.4 billion in 1998-99 to £39.5 billion; and some changes to standard spending assessments—the formulae used to distribute grant.

Two of the reports before the House contain my decisions following formal consultation on those proposals. The third report corrects an error made by the previous Government in 1996. I should like to spell out some facts about the settlement for 1999-2000.

There is more than £1.4 billion more for education, following the £835 million extra provided last year, and more than £500 million more for social services. Total standard spending is up by £2.6 billion—5.5 per cent., as I have said—compared with last year. Let us remind ourselves of the increases since the council tax came into being—just 0.9 per cent. in 1995-96, and 2.5 per cent. in 1997-98.

The average for the years under the previous Government was only 2.4 per cent. This year's increase is more than twice the average for all the years of the previous Administration.

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): I welcome what my right hon. Friend has done, but is he aware of representations by Oldham metropolitan borough, which feels that the changes made do not deal with all the anomalies in the area cost adjustment? The major problem is that SSAs, which were well worked out in the past, will be fixed for three years, creating anomalies during that

period. I know that my right hon. Friend is investigating how he can improve matters, but is there no chance of making changes during that three-year period?

Mr. Prescott: My right hon. Friend will recall that I said in a previous debate that one of the three standard assessments that we are dealing with had to do with children's services. We have made a judgment on that and can address ourselves to it. The others deal with education and the area adjustments to which he has referred. It is difficult to reach agreement there, and I shall return to the point later. Something like 41 formulae apply, and quite radical changes and consequences flow. We have decided not to make a decision at the moment, but to continue discussions throughout the three years.

The next round of public expenditure commitments will start early in that period, and discussions on standard spending assessment will take place during that process, so we shall have had to reach some decision. I understand my right hon. Friend's concern, but when he hears hon. Members talking about the effects of the changes we have made to just one area, he will appreciate the difficulties that we must take into account if we want to reach a proper consensus.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley): Many hon. Members on both sides are concerned about distribution. Would the Secretary of State comment on the apparent change in definition of SSAs contained in paragraph 3.2 of "The Local Government Finance Report (England) 1999/2000"?

Mr. Prescott: I shall come to the SSAs shortly if the hon. Gentleman will wait a little.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Can the Secretary of State confirm whether what was said by the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) was correct? Is the Secretary of State ruling out any change in the area cost adjustment over the next three years? Is that the implication of his reply to the right hon. Gentleman's question?

Mr. Prescott: Let me be clear about that. We shall continue discussions, and I shall report back to the House each year on settlements. The hon. Gentleman should wait to see how far we get in those discussions. We have settled on the children's support schemes, and I shall deal with that point in a few moments. Every year, I shall come to the House to inform hon. Members on how far we have gone, and on how much further we may be able to progress.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): If these matters are so difficult—especially the area cost adjustment—why did the Prime Minister promise three days before the general election that he would change the area cost adjustment for 1998-99? He failed to do so, and now he is trying to set in stone that it should not change for a further three years.

Mr. Prescott: I do not think that the Prime Minister said exactly that. [HON. MEMBERS: "He did."] No, he did not. I do not want to get into a dispute over that. We intend, over our five-year period in Government, to deal with all the commitments in our manifesto, and even with the statements made by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. Nearly two thirds of our manifesto commitments are already under way, which shows how good the Government's record is. [HON. MEMBERS: "What about trains?"] I do not think that trains can be blamed on me after the Conservative privatisation. The Tories will blame everyone, having decided that marriage is back in fashion and God knows what else they did not believe before.

Let me repeat what I said before I was rudely interrupted. There is more than £1.4 billion more for education, following the £835 million extra provided last year, and more than £500 million more for social services. Total standard spending is up by £2.6 billion—5.5 per cent.—compared with last year. Let us remind ourselves of how that compares with the 2.4 per cent. increase under the previous Administration. Twice as much is being made available in the most generous settlement given to local authorities for seven years. I see no one contesting that, although the opportunity is there for anyone who wants to jump in.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate) *rose—*

Mr. Prescott: Thank you.

Mr. Blunt: The borough of Reigate and Banstead has had a real cut in its settlement because moneys have been raided out of flood defences. How does that fact square with the imposition of 2,600 homes on the borough in an area that is liable to flood? When it floods, will the Secretary of State return money to the borough to make up for its having been robbed from it now?

Mr. Prescott: The previous Administration held back money, never giving any for flood relief. They offered every reason as to why they could not pay out for that.

Mr. Blunt *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Prescott: I do not want to argue about flood relief, which is just one part of expenditure. The hon. Gentleman's authority, like all the others, will receive more than it did last year. That is a basic fact. Does he disagree with it?

Mr. Blunt *indicated assent.*

Mr. Prescott: Have a look at the figures and then apologise.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam) *rose—*

Mr. Prescott: I must get on. There is limited time for the debate. I am trying to give way, but I should like to continue.

Mr. Jim Marshall (Leicester, South): I apologise for intervening because I know that my right hon. Friend wants to make a short speech. Indeed, I wish to speak myself. I accept what he says, but for local authorities such as Leicester, the social services changes mean a reduction in revenue support of nearly £2.7 million. Does he accept that while we are still getting a real-terms

[Mr. Jim Marshall]

increase, it is substantially below the national average? Can he offer any hope over the next 12 months that that imbalance will be addressed?

Mr. Prescott: My hon. Friend has a fair point about what came out of the changes in standard spending assessment; it is one of the difficulties, and I shall come to it. We have listened to the arguments of hon. Members and found an extra £30 million to try to deal with that.

The settlement is the most generous since the introduction of council tax.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Prescott: No. I must go on.

Most councils will do well out of this year's settlement, and some very well. The Government will put in £2 billion more in grant. That means council taxes need bear only a fair share of the spending increase. I recognise that while all education authorities will get more money, some will be hard pressed because of the SSA changes. As I explained in a written answer on 1 February, I have found extra money to help the most hard-pressed authorities with education and social service responsibilities. No authority will lose in cash terms.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): The right hon. Gentleman's reply on 1 February says that the additional grant is in respect of losses on the children's services element of the spending assessment. He then said that he would distribute a grant relating to total SSA. As a result, a county such as North Yorkshire will lose £3 million in cash on social services, largely because of a children's indicator, but get nothing at all from the £30 million. There is a dislocation between the reason for the money and its distribution.

Mr. Prescott: The right hon. Gentleman knows the difficulties of damping in dealing with SSA. The previous Administration did little to help on that. *[Interruption.]* I am reminded that they did nothing. I was trying to be charitable because the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) understands the subject more than most of us. There are great difficulties.

I now come to the SSA and the consequential effects mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, South (Mr. Marshall). We cannot satisfy everyone when we begin to make changes. All we can hope for is fair criteria for distributing the money. That is what governed us on the matter.

The right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon used to go through the yearly discussions with local authorities about the rate support grant and got a difficult ride at some meetings. That did not happen this year. It was quite boring because the authorities thought that the settlement was generous. The right hon. Gentleman's well-known reply was, "We got stuffed by the Treasury." I was not in that situation. We have done a lot better because our Treasury listened to our arguments.

We have announced the totals of SSAs for the next three years. Councils must recognise—I am sure that they do—that they should not expect to be able to deal with the problems of 18 years in one year. This three-year settlement, which the Local Government Association called for, means that councils can plan ahead now that they know there is a three-year period. They should plan for service improvements and for reasonable—not excessive—council tax increases.

We have considered representations about the SSA formula and there were three big issues about which many hon. Members were concerned. They were children's social services, where we proposed changes, additional education need, and the area cost adjustment, for both of which we propose no change. The basic principle of my proposals is to make the grant distribution fairer.

For both additional educational need and the area cost adjustment, we had many reform proposals to choose from. For example, we had 21 detailed options on area cost adjustment, but there was no clear front runner on merit or in terms of support from local government. It would not have been right to take decisions on the area cost adjustment and additional education needs now when it was clear that there were unresolved issues raised by local authorities which needed further work. If there is one area in which we should seek consensus, it is this because it affects so many local authorities and people.

The most significant change that I propose is to adjust the way in which we deal with children's social services. The change is based on extensive research and three years' discussion with local government. Even this change is not without controversy. The new formula for children's social services would not take into account ethnic minority populations. Some questioned whether that was fair and those voices have been heard in the Chamber. It is a matter that deserves the most careful consideration. However, detailed research showed that indicators of deprivation that can apply to all parts of the community are better than those that relate only to ethnic minorities. I have, therefore, confirmed that proposal.

I also confirmed the other proposals that I made on SSA on my 2 December statement to the House. When the SSA formula changes, there are winners and losers. I do not pretend that it is easy for the councils that lose, but I can at least say two things. First, the Government have not and would not adjust the SSA figures to favour councils because of their political leadership. Secondly, we have listened to the authorities that would lose most from their grants because of the change. Their views were expressed in the debate when I made my first announcement on the revenue support grant. I have, therefore, put £30 million more into the settlement and guarantee that all education and social service authorities will receive at least 1.5 per cent. more in grant in 1999-2000 than they did this year. That is an increase. It is an improvement on my original proposal to ensure that no authority loses grant. A little more than £2 million will have to be taken from the revenue support grant to help fund this.

Under the new grant, Brent, for example, will receive £2.4 million more than I proposed in December. West Sussex and Leicester will each get £1.7 million more. Over the next three years, we shall work jointly with local government on a thorough review of revenue grant distribution. We have set ourselves the task of looking for

a simpler, more stable, more robust, fairer system. We want to examine the fundamentals of the financial system governing local authorities.

Mr. Allan: The Deputy Prime Minister said that he would be utterly fair and not consider the politics of local councillors. He knows that people in places such as Sheffield felt disadvantaged by political bias under the previous Government. Will he make it absolutely clear that no community will ever lose out because of the local council it elects, and will he be utterly scrupulous in that respect?

Mr. Prescott: I am proposing criteria by which people can judge that. The aim of SSAs is to achieve fairness. If we are not fair and choose to make political decisions that favour one political party, it will be clear so that everyone can make that judgment. Such conduct is not unknown. Many local authority settlements under the previous Administration were geared to their county areas. The trouble is most of them are now Labour.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): Is the right hon. Gentleman aware of the public claim of Ruth Coleman, the Liberal Democrat leader of North Wilshire district council, that she received a personal letter from him saying that the comparatively generous settlement for North Wiltshire was a direct result of her bringing in new council policies? Did he write to her saying that he was benefiting North Wiltshire because the Liberal Democrats control it?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Interventions should be brief, not mini-speeches. I do not appeal to hon. Members to make brief interventions; I instruct them to.

Mr. Prescott: I have received many thousands of letters, but I assure the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) that I have not sent or signed any letter that would give any such political favour. The Liberals have a tendency to say such things.

We considered representations on our proposals for council tax benefit and subsidy limitation. I have concluded that it is right to maintain the simple principle that led us to adopt the policy. Local authorities should not expect to be able to pass all the costs of their tax decisions back to central Government. If councils increase their council taxes above the guidelines, they will have to contribute to the benefit costs.

Mr. Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley): This morning, we had a delegation from Labour-controlled Northumberland county council, which is in a bit of difficulty with the new SSAs. It would like a fairer system. I know that my right hon. Friend will consider that over three years. It was talking about a figure of 10 per cent., and it is a Labour-controlled authority.

Mr. Prescott: Northumberland has received a 5.5 per cent. increase—which is twice as much as it has received before. That is at least a step towards social justice, and we shall continue to review the finances.

We have considered representations on our proposals for council tax benefit subsidy limitation. However, I have concluded that it is right to maintain the simple principle that led us to adopt this measure. Local authorities should not expect to be able to pass on all the costs of their tax decisions to central Government.

Mr. Ian Bruce *rose—*

Mr. Prescott: If councils increase—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) must behave himself.

Mr. Prescott: To be honest, Mr. Deputy Speaker, he is the only person who is getting excited about this.

If councils increase council taxes above the guideline, they will contribute to the benefit costs. I was not persuaded that it would be right to limit the contributions any further than the taper that I have proposed or to exempt authorities in particular situations. We will protect authorities that have a higher than average proportion of council tax met by benefit, and they will be treated as though they had an average proportion. That strikes a balance that ensures that the poorest authorities are not treated unfairly.

If we announced capping limits in advance, we would lose the point of abolishing crude capping. Each authority must reach a sensible conclusion in the light of local circumstances. I make no secret of my determination to act if authorities behave unreasonably. They should bear in mind that the Government are contributing their fair share—some £39.5 billion; £2 billion more than this year—to support the local expenditure of £50.6 billion.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way and I am very impressed by his remarks about fairness. I am sure that he believes absolutely in democracy. In that case, why does he not simply remove the cap and allow local people to decide the level of taxes in their area?

Mr. Prescott: The hon. Lady—who, even allowing for modern political movements, is not likely ever to sit on this Bench—must understand that we have to strike a balance between local and national interests. Governments are responsible for raising taxes, setting out public expenditure programmes and taking decisions about the grants that local authorities will receive. Fifty billion pounds is a substantial amount under any circumstances.

We must make a judgment, and we believe that that is a fair amount of money. It is twice as much as previous settlements and is sufficient to meet the fair provision of services. At the end of the day, democracy will count in local authority areas. Councillors must argue their case with the people, who will either support or reject them. As Labour controls more councils than ever before—it is a record number for any political party—we must be on the right track.

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North–East): On the point about local communities supporting council tax levels that are higher than the Government recommend, is my right hon. Friend aware that my authority is

[Mr. Brian White]

conducting a referendum on that issue? If the people vote for higher local council tax, will the Government recognise the validity of that result?

Mr. Prescott: My hon. Friend must be aware that we are proposing legislation that will give such powers to local authorities. We would then take that provision into account. However, I am bound to say that that is not the position this year as we are operating under the law as it presently stands. If an authority says that it wants to do A, B or C, we will take its wishes into account. However, its decisions are not binding upon us. Ultimately, we are bound by the national interest, what we believe to be a fair amount of money for local authorities and what is fair for council tax payers. That is a proper judgment to make, and that is our approach.

I was struck by the time that was spent on formal consultation about the settlement. There has been considerable consultation, and it cannot be right to consume so much of the time of councillors and officers. Ministers have had 72 meetings, each involving several local members and officers—and I am sure that Opposition Members are familiar with the pain of constant meetings. Officers travel to London and often lose a whole day. I do not expect any significant changes to the way in which the grant is distributed next year. As a general rule, I shall expect written representations, which will be considered carefully—particularly when there appear to be errors in our provisional calculations. We shall of course continue to meet the local authority associations.

The next three years will offer stable grants, the opportunity to plan with greater flexibility, and the chance to reinvest efficiency savings and to have a fundamental look at the fairness and clarity of the grant system. We have listened to the representations and we have made an extra £30 million available in order to protect those authorities most affected by change. Authorities will receive an average increase in support of 5.5 per cent. All education authorities will receive at least 1.5 per cent. more in grant and no council will receive less grant next year than it received this year. This is the best settlement for seven years, and I commend it to the House.

4.36 pm

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South–West Norfolk): When introducing last year's local government finance settlement in December 1997, the Secretary of State took the opportunity of making several promises regarding his Government's intentions for local government. Among other things, he claimed that he would achieve a prospect of fairness, increased local discretion allied to greater local accountability, the ending of crude and universal capping, and the restoration of new and more positive relations between central and local government. Has the right hon. Gentleman really just announced his intention to see no delegations next year? Maybe he thinks that, if he does not see people, it will contribute to new and more positive relations between him and local government.

Mr. Robert Jackson (Wantage): As to Labour's promises, Oxfordshire now faces three years of substantial reductions in services and increased council tax. Does my right hon. Friend agree that those people who voted Labour and Liberal at the last general election were sold a false prospectus?

Mrs. Shephard: I agree with my hon. Friend. There are many disappointed groups and areas around the country not only as a result of last year's settlement but because of the prospect of this year's settlement.

Mr. Ian Bruce: The Deputy Prime Minister has demonstrated that he is getting wiser as the years go by. He clearly would not give way to me because he knew that the grant situation in Dorset is so appalling that he could not possibly continue with his speech. He has decided—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) is not responsible for the Secretary of State's speech. I am sure that she cannot reply to that intervention.

Mrs. Shephard: My hon. Friend makes his point very eloquently. We know about the situation in Dorset and in the south of England generally. We shall expect the Minister for Local Government and Housing to reply to those points in detail in her winding-up speech.

We know what last year's settlement delivered. It delivered a record 8.6 per cent. increase in council tax across the board—so much for the right hon. Gentleman's commitment to best value. It achieved a political switch of £50 million away from London authorities and £100 million away from shire areas to the right hon. Gentleman's friends in the north—so much for the prospect of fairness and so much for local discretion allied with local accountability.

Dr. George Turner (North–West Norfolk): I thank the right hon. Lady for her kindness in giving way. Before she continues, does she not wish to speak on behalf of the people of Norfolk—whom she and I represent—and thank the Government for the best settlement not only in seven years but in 20? Instead of facing the problems that I faced as chair of education when we could not meet the teachers' pay settlement—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I call Mrs. Shephard.

Mrs. Shephard: Why does the Secretary of State not give the hon. Gentleman a job—it would spare us this sort of thing? I remind the hon. Gentleman that last year Norfolk got the worst settlement in its entire history, and that it is not under a Conservative Administration that Norfolk has had to face the closure of all its youth centres and the sale of all its homes for the elderly.

In the Deputy Prime Minister's statement to the House on 2 December 1998 on this year's revenue support grant settlement, he could—if he had meant what he said the year before—have put right the damage last year's settlement did, but he chose not do so. For all his hype, today's settlement perpetuates the switch of funds away

from rural areas and from London, and demonstrates a new trend of a clear disadvantage in funding terms for authorities and their communities in the south of England.

Mr. Prescott: The right hon. Lady told the House that last year's settlement was worse than any under a Tory Administration. In fact, in 1995-96, under a Tory Government, the increase was 0.4 per cent.

Mrs. Shephard: I also said that it was not under a Conservative Administration that Norfolk had to face the loss of all its youth centres and all its homes for the elderly. That happened under a Labour Government and a Lib-Lab council.

This settlement, despite all the right hon. Gentleman's huffing and puffing, will result in council tax rises across the board. He has said little about that. I wonder whether he would like to comment on the fact that the Treasury's assumptions in its pre-Budget report of 3 November 1998 were for a council tax rise of 7.7 per cent., which appears curiously at variance with his predictions.

Mr. Prescott: The right hon. Lady should look up the facts of the case. If she looks carefully, she will see that the Red Book refers to England, Scotland and Wales, whereas our proposal refers only to England. As so often, she is not comparing like with like.

Mrs. Shephard: I can go on. The right hon. Gentleman's view, expressed on 2 December last year, that the settlement was

"the best deal for years for local people"—[*Official Report*, 2 December 1998; Vol. 321, c. 886.]

is not a view shared by local people throughout the country. Local people in Norfolk face a council tax rise of four times the rate of inflation. Local people in Buckinghamshire will have to pay a council tax rise of more than 9 per cent. Local people in Cambridgeshire face both a £12 million shortfall and the Prime Minister's broken promise about their future status in respect of the area cost adjustment. Local people in Worcestershire, Oxfordshire, Surrey, Essex, Kent, West Sussex and Dorset see that the Government's methodology has robbed them of millions, which will inevitably lead to council tax rises in double figures, according to the *Local Government Chronicle*.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): I cannot imagine why my right hon. Friend has excluded Somerset from that litany. I have just come downstairs from dealing with letters of despair from many head teachers in Somerset, who, as a result of the settlement, face the prospect of teacher redundancies and serious problems for their schools.

Mrs. Shephard: It is perhaps because of such views—the views of real people—that the Deputy Prime Minister has announced his intention not to see any delegations next year.

Mr. Eric Illsley (Barnsley, Central): Barnsley council has this year received its highest settlement for a long time—the fifth highest settlement of any local authority this year. However, even with that 7.2 per cent. increase and assuming a 10 per cent. increase in the council tax, the authority this week faced £10.2 million worth of cuts. Those cuts come not as a consequence of the Labour Government's settlement, but as a consequence of the previous Government's refusing, for nine years, to alter the SSA methodology. The right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry)—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mrs. Shephard: Could what the hon. Gentleman describes have something to do with the way in which Barnsley is run?

Mr. Michael J. Foster (Worcester): The right hon. Lady mentioned that Worcestershire faced a double-digit increase in council tax. Can she tell the House what proof she has of that? If she has no proof, will she withdraw the remark? If Worcestershire delivers a council tax increase that is less than double digits, will she apologise to the House?

Mrs. Shephard: The hon. Gentleman's remarks have been received with a degree of incredulity by Conservative Members. When I read my list of the worst affected authorities, I made it clear that my source was the *Local Government Chronicle*. The *Local Government Chronicle* is equally concerned about the position in London, as is the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone), who wrote movingly in the *Evening Standard* of 29 January 1999:

"How has it all gone so sour so quickly?"

He continues:

"The nightmare is that this new scheme is supposed to stay in place unchanged for the next three years."

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): I am overexcited by the intervention from the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr. Foster). Had he been doing his duty by his constituents, he would have said that there was a great likelihood of there being a double-digit increase in the council tax in Worcestershire. Even the director of social services in the county has accepted that there is to be a 4 per cent. real-terms cut in the social services budget in this financial year.

Mrs. Shephard *rose*—

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): Will my right hon. Friend give way—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I must call on the House to settle down. Hon. Members are being most unruly and there is far too much noise.

Mr. Baldry: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. I do not understand why Labour Members are being so shy about the fact that the budget for Oxfordshire county council, which was tabled by the Labour group on that council, clearly shows that the Labour group wants a council tax rise in Oxfordshire of 12.5 per cent.

Mrs. Shephard: Indeed. As my hon. Friend makes clear, we know very well who runs the council in Oxfordshire. My hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride) has caused the hon. Member for

[Mrs. Shephard]

Worcester (Mr. Foster) to stand corrected and we hope that it will be he who apologises if the council tax rise turns out as expected.

Sadly, the figures announced by the Government in December and confirmed today by the Deputy Prime Minister have set the seal on a systematic fix to benefit the Labour party's friends in the north at the expense of rural England, London and the south.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Shephard: No, I intend to make a little progress now.

Over the past two years, rural areas have lost £250 million of funding, thanks to the Government's changes to the methodology. As we have heard this afternoon, those have been set in stone and it is no good anybody asking to see the Deputy Prime Minister because he will see no one; so rural authorities are set to lose a further £300 million during the two remaining years of this Parliament.

London, too, has been hit. It has lost £140 million during the past two years and will lose a further £180 million during the next two. The hon. Member for Brent, East painted a stark picture in last Friday's *Evening Standard* when he wrote that Brent faced having to cut education by £2.4 million, to slash provision for old-age pensioners, the disabled and children in care, to close day centres and libraries, to end the youth service, to cut road maintenance—and so on. He pointed out that the picture would be the same in Hackney, Newham, Haringey and Lambeth.

Mr. Prescott: Why is he not here?

Mrs. Shephard: I dare say that the hon. Member is busy canvassing.

The Deputy Prime Minister has attempted to point out that that loss has been adjusted by his use of the special grant system, but as he has also pointed out, that is only transitional. His intention is that the underlying pattern of injustice should continue.

Further disturbing patterns emerge from this year's settlement. Analysis reveals that of the 25 councils that have been the least favourably treated in terms of Government grant, 20 are in the south of England. Their council tax payers have been singled out by the Government for the highest council tax increases.

It is up to Ministers to explain their motivation for those changes, which to the outside world could appear political. Whatever their motivation is, they cannot maintain—not while keeping a straight face, anyway—that the highest increases have been awarded to efficient or well run councils. Time does not permit me to give a full recital of the goings-on in corrupt Labour-controlled councils, but is it not ironic that Labour-controlled Birmingham will get the biggest increase this year? That council accumulated losses of £2.5 million from the super prix. In Birmingham, the question, "How many people does it take to change a light bulb?" gets the answer, "I don't know, but I do know that each one earns £42,000 a year."

Sheffield has done very nicely too.

Mr. David Lock (Wyre Forest): Having insulted everybody north of Watford by using the expression "friends in the north", will the right hon. Lady tell us whether she includes the people of Birmingham in that category? Does the fact that she has insulted all the people who voted for Labour councils mean that she has given up any hope of making gains for her party in May's elections?

Mrs. Shephard: I find it extraordinary that a Labour Member should think that it an insult to call someone a friend of the Labour party, but that is a problem for the hon. Gentleman.

I suppose that Rotherham council is being rewarded for the fact that its deputy leader has, apparently, been suspended following allegations that money that should have been contributed to the Forum Against Poverty went instead on hotel and prostitution bills.

Mr. David Watts (St. Helens, North): While the right hon. Lady is naming names concerning the scandalous behaviour of Labour councillors, will she take the opportunity to condemn Lady Porter, who happened to run off with millions of pounds of taxpayers' money?

Mrs. Shephard: The best ones are the old ones and that one, as the hon. Gentleman knows, is sub judice.

We have heard a great deal about education from the Deputy Prime Minister. Conservative Members have consistently welcomed the Government's investment in education, and I do so again today. However, it is ironic that after the Government have organised that investment, gift-wrapped it and kept it in the Department for Education and Employment so that it can be announced and re-announced every time the Secretary of State for Education and Employment or the Prime Minister visits a school, not only is it now unavailable to fund the teachers' pay award but it may even threaten some of the gift-wrapped schemes themselves.

As the Brent primary school head teachers' group said in a letter to my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), the Brent education committee is having to consider not only sacking teachers and cutting school budgets but making reductions on some of the Government's flagship projects such as the national grid for learning, the numeracy strategy and the social exclusion initiative.

As Graham Lane, the chairman of the Local Government Association's education committee, said:

> "We all want to see teachers receiving a fair wage rise but this settlement means being forced to find an extra £70 million unless the Government fully funds the cost".

Of course, the Government could do that if some of the £1 billion put aside for restructuring pay were used to avert an unnecessary crisis, as local authority employers have suggested.

We have heard much today from the Deputy Prime Minister about the size of the settlement. We have heard rather less about the council tax rises that he expects. In fact, we have no idea how much of an increase he will tolerate, which is not much comfort for council tax payers throughout the country. Capping is a system with faults—no one denies that. It is no substitute for the clarity and

accountability that could be achieved by a thoroughgoing reform of local government, giving councils financial accountability.

However, by introducing a hide-and-seek approach to local government finance, the Government have, instead of tackling the weaknesses of capping, removed its strengths and put nothing in their place. They have taken decisions out of the public eye. Their object is not to expose high-spending authorities to the control of accountable local democracy but to augment the power of the centre.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Does my right hon. Friend agree that local authority leaders of all parties will be most concerned about the Deputy Prime Minister's refusal to see any delegation next year? Is not that a negation of democracy and an indication that he wants to entrench for ever the favouring of Labour councils outside shire counties? Is not that a complete refusal to do his job?

Mrs. Shephard: I hope that, by the time the Minister for Local Government and Housing concludes the debate, she will have put right the impression that the Deputy Prime Minister may regret having created.

The Deputy Prime Minister's proposals for council tax benefit subsidy compound the problem that he is creating. *[Interruption.]* The Minister for Local Government and Housing seems to want to make her contribution now. Perhaps, when she concludes the debate, she will explain why the Government have taken no notice whatever in their consultation of the views of the Local Government Association on the changes to subsidy arrangements.

The LGA has opposed the changes, and we agree with it. It has done so because they will impact unfairly on different parts of the country, with the result that council tax payers in the poorest areas will be hit harder than those in better-off areas. In other words, the nearly poor will pay for the really poor. The LGA believes that the Government should meet the cost of welfare benefits, not local authorities or council tax payers. It believes that the scheme is very complex—at least in that it agrees with the Deputy Prime Minister—and that the guidelines seek to reimpose the very capping that the Government said in opposition they wished to end. The LGA opposes the scheme because, perhaps most ludicrously, it will hit authorities that spend below their SSAs—23 such authorities, including eight in London, which is another hit on London.

The Deputy Prime Minister wants the country to believe that this settlement is the best deal for years. Although he may claim to have increased the global amount, he has done so in a way that is unfair, arbitrary and open to political manipulation. It deepens the divide between country and town, disadvantages London and the south of England, and adds nothing to the clarity and accountability in local government that the right hon. Gentleman never tires of telling us he seeks. For those reasons, we shall oppose motion No. 2.

4.57 pm

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and his Ministers on keeping the election promise to local government and on providing this financial settlement. It is the best that has been offered to local government for many years, and is fully appreciated. Due to the time limit on speeches, I shall address my remarks to the single issue of the council tax benefit limitation scheme. I ask my right hon. Friend to give further thought to the issue.

I remind the House of the injury sustained by local government over 18 years of Tory rule—18 years of constant attack by Conservative Ministers cutting grants and resources, which in turn meant cutting services and, year on year, increasing council tax. The Tories used the rate support grant formula to award increases in grants to a few Tory councils—but they cut grants to many Labour-controlled and other councils, which now form the Special Interest Group of Municipal Authorities—SIGOMA—of which my authority, Wakefield, is a member.

Cuts in grants meant council tax increases to help to sustain services—essential services in many areas. As a result, local government aggregate spending rose to £2 billion higher than the standard spending assessment. That disparity still applies. It is one of the anomalies that local authorities have to face. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. There are too many conversations taking place in the Chamber. That is unfair to the hon. Gentleman who is addressing the House.

Mr. O'Brien: I have raised the matter previously. An analysis should be conducted of the aggregate spending and the standard spending assessment, so that we can level the playing field for local government.

I draw attention to the effects of the Conservatives' policies on local government, which have resulted in councils throughout the country being poorer in resources, still being classed as poor councils, and having a substantial number of low-value properties and a high percentage of people claiming benefit. That is the situation in many parts of the north of England, particularly in the mining communities. Many authorities in SIGOMA have an estimated average of more than 20 per cent. of their total council tax income coming from benefit. As a result of social inequalities, those benefit claimants are the very people who require more services.

If a council in the poorer group of local authorities tried to increase its council tax over its budget requirements to sustain services, the application of the council tax benefit subsidy limitation scheme would be devastating, because of the clawback of the rate support grant.

The council tax benefit is payable to help people who cannot afford to pay their council tax. It is a social benefit and, I believe, it should be the responsibility of the Government to meet the cost. Such direct welfare costs should not be a charge on the resources of local authorities. I emphasise that I am speaking of the poorer council group in local government.

I appeal to my right hon. Friend to look again at capping and to review his decision on the procedures for capping. I also ask for more time for all of us to consider the implications of the Government's proposal. As it is not yet statute, more thought should be given to it. I ask for the introduction of the council tax benefit subsidy scheme to be deferred. Because of its complexity, we need more time to analyse it. Amendments have been suggested for my right hon. Friend to consider. Perhaps he would be willing to meet Back-Bench Members so that we could offer our points of view before the final decisions are made.

[Mr. O'Brien]

I ask for a review of the scheme to localise part of the cost of council tax benefit subsidy. If the proposal were implemented in its current form, it would hit the poorest areas hardest. It is the responsibility of Government, not of local authorities, to meet the cost of welfare benefits. Help given to poor people with their council tax payments is a social benefit.

The guideline increases are widely seen as a direct substitute for crude and universal capping. I supported my right hon. Friend and the policy of the Labour party to abolish the crude capping procedure. As we do not have all the necessary information, we need more time to consider and discuss the Government's proposal.

The capping scheme can apply to local authorities below the SSA. That is a further anomaly that we should consider. The scheme will also obscure the public's understanding of council tax increases. I support the efforts of my right hon. Friend and his Ministers to improve relationships within our communities to generate more interest in local government.

To defer the council tax benefit subsidy limitation scheme would demonstrate my right hon. Friend's fairness. A deferment for a minimum of 12 months would give hon. Members with an interest in local government the opportunity to analyse the system. Again, I reiterate my request for an opportunity to discuss the matter with Ministers.

The application of the rate support grant is widely welcomed, particularly in education and social services. Members of SIGOMA have, on more than one occasion, thanked Ministers for the settlement, which is far in excess of what local government ever received in a single year under the Tories. Because of that background, I hope that we will have an opportunity to discuss the matter so that my right hon. Friend's reputation for fairness remains unspoilt.

5.7 pm

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): My right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) and my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) have asked to be associated with the remarks that I shall make about North Yorkshire.

I am interested in the Government's recently enunciated concept of open government, which means that they will not meet delegations. I hope that does not have too much of an impact on the January sales in London next year.

Two elements are particularly disappointing. The area cost adjustment is a difficult area, but the Labour Opposition did not give the previous Tory Government the impression that it was an insoluble problem. They said they would crack it pretty quickly. It is difficult and there is a distortion, and the trouble with stability for three years is that those who get the money are pleased with the stability, while those who wish that they had it are displeased with the stability.

I am more concerned about the Government's failure to address additional educational needs. That indicator is now out of date. Too much weight is given to ethnicity. There is no perfect correlation between ethnicity and educational underachievement. A significant amount of educational underachievement in, for example, London, is to be found in disadvantaged white families. It should be possible to move away from that rather mechanistic formula and to target resources where there is a clear need.

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): In my constituency of Tower Hamlets, 102 languages are spoken in the classrooms, and about two thirds of children have parents who do not speak a second language. That has to affect their chances.

Mr. Curry: My point is that, at the moment, we have a mechanical indicator. Ethnicity plays a heavy part throughout the school scale. I am looking for an indicator which is more sensitive to the identification of real problems in education and which moves away from that rather mechanistic background. I am not predisposed to say that we should give less money to the hon. Lady's constituents or to those of another hon. Member. I want to reflect need more effectively. That is what is important.

The hon. Member for Normanton (Mr. O'Brien) made some sensible remarks about the council tax benefit schemes. I hope that the Secretary of State has listened to them, and I endorse entirely the points that the hon. Gentleman made about the need to look at the schemes much more carefully before they are introduced.

I want to address the particular situation in North Yorkshire, and, first of all, the fiction that there has been a real increase in resources in education. I say that having seen the letter from the Secretary of State for Education and Employment—the usual threatening letter—saying, "This money has all got to go to education." There is a dangerous tendency: more and more, the Government want to hypothecate expenditure to individual services.

Secondly, North Yorkshire has taken a cash hit of £3.1 million on social services. The Secretary of State unveiled £30 million extra at the beginning of the week and I immediately rang North Yorkshire with the glad tidings that that was supposed to compensate local authorities that had taken a hit on social services, but the distribution is not related to the hit on social services. It is related to the overall position on standard spending assessments.

That means that there is a perverse outcome. North Yorkshire has taken a bigger hit than West Sussex, for example, but West Sussex comes out with an extra £2 million while North Yorkshire has nothing. Wandsworth has been given £6 million; Westminster, which has clearly been rehabilitated in the Government's sights, has been given £4 million; and Brent has been given £2.4 million. North Yorkshire, which has taken that severe hit, has been given no additional resources at all.

Social services are in a serious position, and—

Mr. Willis *rose—*

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay) *rose—*

Mr. Curry: I will not give way, because of the time limit. I am sorry about that. The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) will agree that, because of way that social services are framed in North Yorkshire, and because of the number of homes in Harrogate and Scarborough, we have suffered particular difficulty. The hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Quinn) was in the Chamber, but is here no longer.

The education SSA has gone up by nearly £13 million. The county council will make sure that all that money goes to education, but we must look at what comes out of it, if we are to make a sensible assessment. We must take into account the increase in school pupil numbers, the overhang of last year's teachers' pay settlement and this year's pay settlement. The county budgeted for 3.5 per cent., but, because of the particular increase for primary school head teachers—the necessity for which I accept—and because we have 327 primary schools in North Yorkshire, that settlement has been pushed up to almost 4 per cent.

The standards fund, which used to be called GEST—grant for education support and training—and which met the requirements for special educational needs also has to be taken into account. Even if all that money goes to schools, there will be a 1.5 per cent. cut in each school budget. That is under a scheme that the Government keep telling us represents the priority "education, education, education". *[Interruption.]* There is no point in the Minister for Local Government and Housing muttering from a sedentary position. The fact is that that is a real cut for education in North Yorkshire. She blathers about this matter, as the Government do about so many other things.

In social services, all the voluntary organisations are facing cuts. I could wave the bleeding stumps around the Chamber, as Labour Members used to do when the positions were reversed, and I could throw at the Minister a sheaf of letters from voluntary organisations complaining about the cuts. Voluntary organisations are indispensable to delivering social services—they are not delivered only by the county council. The council depends enormously on the good will and co-operation of voluntary organisations to make sure that services work in practice.

The county will try to bail people out by lending £1 million from the reserves, but it has also taken a hit on the landfill tax and the withdrawal of tax relief on investment dividends will cost the pension funds £500,000. How do we get out of that? The Secretary of State's guideline for council tax increases works out at 4.9 per cent., but the proposal from the Conservative ruling group—which, I think, has the support of all the parties—is for a 9.6 per cent. increase.

The crisis in education and the cuts in social services mean that that increase will not even maintain the level of services, but they mean that North Yorkshire has been badly let down. Every teacher, every child, every social worker, every pupil and every elderly person needing help has been badly let down by the Government.

Is there a margin for manoeuvre? No, because North Yorkshire's working balances are the third lowest in English counties and are already close to the point at which the auditor will get extremely nervous about their low level. However, there is one thing that the Minister could do to help. The county council was awarded nearly £1 million of grant in respect of European schemes last July, but the Treasury still has not paid the money. That is a monstrous failure of administration on the part of a Government who talk constantly about the need for big companies to ensure that their debts to little companies are paid on time. The sooner the money is paid, the better.

This is a scandalous situation and a bad settlement. The Government have funked the major indicators, which will have an impact on everyone. There is a three-year moratorium which freezes the amount, and which, apparently, will not even be subject to discussion. All that has been accompanied by the usual glib and partial presentation. The people of North Yorkshire will know who is to blame, but the taxpayers will be stuffed by a Government who are big on rhetoric, but miserably threadbare when it comes to any form of delivery.

5.16 pm

Mr. Jim Marshall (Leicester, South): I do not think that it will greatly surprise my hon. Friend the Minister of State for Local Government and Housing to learn that I cannot share all the Secretary of State's enthusiasm for this year's settlement. My hon. Friend will know from her discussions with councillors from my city of Leicester of the difficulties that the city is likely to face as a result of the settlement. She has listened, and she has been very generous to local representatives; she has not been so generous in the additional support that she has announced, but the extra £1.7 million is nevertheless welcome.

May I point out to my hon. Friend a mistake that the Deputy Prime Minister—the Secretary of State—may have made in referring to the £1.7 million which, I think, will go to Leicester as additional benefit? I understand that not all of it is a consequence of "damping" on the reduction in social services, but that £1.3 million arises from that, while the other £0.4 million arises from an update of data. It is not all additional relief, as the Deputy Prime Minister seemed to suggest. While I am referring to my right hon. Friend, let me add that I think he is right to take pride in the settlement that he has achieved on a global scale, although it is unfair in the particular case of Leicester. I think that the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) has a cheek to criticise this Government, who have sought to listen to local representatives, who—notwithstanding what was said from the Dispatch Box—will doubtless continue to listen to them, and who have tried to introduce at least a greater degree of transparency in decision making this year than we saw under her party's Administration.

I am one of those described by the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) who used to wave sheaves of letters at him when he was replying at the Dispatch Box. We all know that, under the Conservative Administration, the revenue settlement was manipulated on purely political grounds. That is the only way to explain the benefit that was given to Westminster and other city boroughs, and the way in which inner-city areas outside London were treated.

Let me return to my basic point, which concerns Leicester. Leicester's settlement is very poor. Our standard spending assessment increase is lower than that of any other unitary or metropolitan authority, and it is the third lowest of all SSAs. It is particularly harsh, given that—the House will know this, as I mentioned it in the two preceding years—it follows hard on the heels of difficult years in 1997-98 and 1998-99. Since Leicester became a unitary authority in 1997, it has had lower SSA increases than any similar authority. Over that two-year period, Leicester has been forced to make cuts of some £20 million. To show the perversity of the Tories' crude capping system, which, unfortunately, we inherited last year, at a time of £20 million cuts, in the first year—1997-98—council tax decreased by 13 per cent., but, last year, it increased by 26 per cent.

[Mr. Jim Marshall]

As I have already said, this year's settlement compounds the difficulties that Leicester faces. As the Minister knows, one of the big problems is the methodology changes to the funding of children's social services. Previously, funding was determined largely by ethnicity. As Leicester has a large ethnic population, this year's change has a profound effect on its allocation. As a consequence purely of those methodology changes, it will lose £2.7 million.

The second big item is the continuing fall in school rolls; that trend has been apparent in Leicester for a number of years. In previous years, I have urged the Government to introduce a damping factor, but they have failed to do so. I hope that they will consider it in the overall review. As a consequence of falling student numbers, Leicester loses £1.7 million for education alone. We have one of the lowest increases in the SSA for education of any local authority.

The Deputy Prime Minister is absolutely correct. We are not suffering a reduction, but the increase that we are being given is hardly sufficient for the service to stand still. Just because pupil numbers are falling does not mean—

Mr. Sanders: Surely, given the fact that the head count is 18 months out of date, if a local authority has falling pupil rolls, it is quids in. It is when it has rising pupil numbers that it has the problem because there is a delay in the money reaching the schools.

Mr. Marshall: I do not really understand the point that the hon. Gentleman seeks to make, but, if he studied the relevant factors, he would know that the numbers are always 18 months to two years out of date. As a consequence, nearly all local authorities receive more educational expenditure than they would if the actual figures were known. Leicester is losing £1.7 million as a result of falling pupil rolls.

The two major changes that I have described, together with other changes that the Government have announced, mean that, this year, Leicester again faces substantial cuts: we have to seek to reduce the budget by some £5.5 million.

My understanding is that the controlling Labour group is meeting this evening to consider a package of cuts totalling about £5.5 million. I understand that it has pledged that that will not affect the level of front-line services, but, inevitably, with that order of cuts, non-front-line services will be severely adversely affected. It is also clear that jobs will inevitably be at risk. Assistance to the voluntary sector will be severely restricted. I understand that the amount of money that the city council gives to the Haymarket and Phoenix theatres in Leicester is likely to be reduced in the coming financial year, which will affect theatre lovers and theatre goers in Leicester. The Minister may argue that the proposed cuts do not affect front-line services, but, as a package, it will severely affect the overall services that Leicester is able provide.

To sum up, this settlement means another abysmal year for Leicester. Although I welcome the additional funding provided by the Government, I remind the House and the Minister that the extra £1.7 million is a one-off figure. Unless the Government find some additional means of providing assistance for Leicester in the next 12 months, the situation we will face next year will be just as difficult as that we are facing this year.

I have a final plea for my hon. Friend the Minister. When my hon. Friend is looking at the specific grants, particularly for social services, I accept that she must be fair to all local authorities, but I hope that she will bend over backwards to be ultra fair to Leicester.

5.26 pm

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): Local government settlements always bring out a touch of the showman—perhaps I should say the magician—in the Secretary of State. This settlement is no different from any previous settlement in that there is smoke and mirrors and plenty of spin.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Burstow: I think I should make a little more progress before taking interventions. I will be happy to take the hon. Lady's intervention later.

This year we are told that council tax need rise by only 4.5 per cent. and that this is the most generous settlement for seven years. Neither claim should be taken at face value. Both are based on the pseudo-science of standard spending assessments and I accept the Secretary of State's comment that it is important to have a thorough review in that respect.

Mr. Sanders: Will my hon. Friend give way? *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Burstow: I will give way to my hon. Friend and then to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman)

Mr. Sanders: The review is important. If we analyse the areas which have done well and those which have done badly, some common themes will emerge. It is clear that the areas that have done badly this year tend to have large numbers of elderly people in care and rising pupil numbers and, demographically, those areas tend to be in the south and south-west. Those two factors must be looked at.

Mr. Burstow: That is a good point and I hope that the Minister is listening. I hope that such points will be taken into account in the review that she is undertaking.

Mrs. Ellman: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, including the increase in SSA for social services of 11.3 per cent., this settlement means that Liverpool city council could freeze council tax very shortly if it wished to do so? Does he intend to advise the Liberal Democrats currently running Liverpool to congratulate the Labour Government on this settlement and the opportunity that it affords them?

Mr. Burstow: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention because it enables me to say that, unlike the Labour party, we do not believe in prescribing from

the centre. I shall certainly not be telling my colleagues on Liverpool city council what to do, which is in stark contrast to the Labour party's approach.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Burstow: I should utter a few more sentences and then I will give way.

It is important to examine a little more closely the idea that there will be a low level of council tax increase and a generous settlement. Last year, the Local Government Association surveyed local authorities to get a picture of the real pressures on budgets and services, some of which we have heard from Labour Members already. The association found that local authorities need a total of £3,188 million of additional revenue just to sustain current levels of service. Taking into account the Government's generous settlement, local government is still left staring into a £1.7 million black hole.

Mr. Gardiner: The hon. Gentleman was talking about the distribution of grant and the patterns that can be seen. Is the hon. Gentleman aware that 50 per cent. of all the losses sustained in children's personal social services in London have been sustained by councils with very high multi-ethnicity? That includes, Brent, Camden, Haringey, Hackney and Lambeth. Tower Hamlets is one of the exceptions because of the large number of tower blocks in the area. Over 50 per cent. of the ethnic population in those boroughs has borne 75 per cent. of all the losses in London.

Mr. Burstow: The hon. Gentleman makes a very fair point—with which the Minister will not agree, although it is borne out in our constituencies, where services are undoubtedly under severe pressure because of decisions made by the Secretary of State and his Ministers about how they will carve up the money available this year to local government.

The funding gap will be bridged in much the same way as it has been for years and years—by increased and new charges, tighter eligibility criteria, higher council tax increases and, of course, service cuts.

So how will this year's settlement be different? Crude and universal capping will remain. The Secretary of State told the House that last year would be the last year in which crude capping would operate. Closer examination of the figures reveals that there is still serious pressure on key services. Moreover, capping will not only remain but have two new added twists.

First, budget setting will become a game of Russian roulette, as the Secretary of State refuses to declare his capping principles in advance.

Secondly, council tax benefit limitation will add belt and braces to the capping system, leaving some of the poorest communities footing the bill for the poorest of their neighbours. I very much welcome the comments of the hon. Member for Normanton (Mr. O'Brien). I hope that Ministers will meet him and other Labour Members, listen to their arguments and decide to abandon that unacceptable and dishonest policy.

When in opposition, Labour Members condemned the previous Government's introduction of the same principle, in proposals to claw back housing benefit. Indeed, 98 Labour Members signed an early-day motion condemning the previous Government on clawing back housing benefit. They should condemn also the proposed council tax benefit clawback.

The problem is that hon. Members will not be able to debate the clawback on the Floor of the House, as it will be dealt with in Committee, as secondary legislation. Legislation passed by the previous Government will therefore enable the current Government to introduce a regime of council tax benefit clawback.

We believe that there should have been a proper debate on the proposal on the Floor of the House, so that it could be amended and debated properly. Instead, the proposal will be rushed through in Committee by a few hon. Members and will not receive proper parliamentary scrutiny. The Government should be condemned for that. They should include the proposal in a local government Bill, so that we may have a proper debate on it.

Closer inspection of the figures provided by the Library reveals that the social services standard spending assessment for England will rise by 1.3 per cent., after adjusting for the current year's special transitional grant for community care. Even on the Government's own figures, that will leave a £100 million gap simply to meet inflation in social services.

A lower than inflation increase for social services will make cuts in current services inevitable. Moreover, the 1.3 per cent. increase disguises considerable variations between classes of authority. Undermining current services by underfunding makes no sense at a time when the Government are setting targets and directing a whole host of specific grants at social services to secure change and improvement. Ultimately, it will be self-defeating.

In a report to Worcestershire's social services committee, the department's director, in describing the effect of the loss of grant for community care, said:

"There will now effectively be no demographic fund to cope with the increasing demands of an ageing society and the particular pressures of people with disabilities living longer and needing a proper quality of life."

He went on to say:

"The likelihood therefore is new spend on new initiatives in some cases, and at the same time deep cuts in other parts of the service."

The problem is that the Government are focused on delivering a change agenda, but are blind to the need to maintain existing core services. Consequently, for example, Leicestershire faces the prospect of rationing admissions to homes for elderly people so that it might bridge the funding gap. Although such rationing is not allowed in law, authorities are working out ways of trying to achieve it. It is another savage cut that will impact on the lives of elderly people.

The same pressures apply to education. We have learnt that Ministers are saying that education funding in the settlement is sufficient to fund the pay award in full. Yet the Secretary of State for Education is writing letters left, right and centre—to governors, head teachers and

[Mr. Burstow]

everyone else—to promise that that money will be given to schools to fund class-size reductions and all of the Government's other initiatives.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I should like to draw to my hon. Friend's attention the remarks of the Minister for School Standards in last night's Adjournment debate. She said:

"I certainly accept the argument that it"—

Somerset county council—

"is receiving less SSA than he and his constituents have a right to expect"—[*Official Report*, 3 February 1999; Vol. 324, c. 1055.]

If that is the case, why are the Government not doing something about it?

Mr. Burstow: That is one reason why we shall vote against this inadequate settlement. Last night's Adjournment debate showed that the Government accept that it is inadequate for Somerset.

Where will the £68 million needed to meet the teachers' pay award come from? It will come from the budget for classroom books and materials and from cuts to other services. My right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) tells me that, according to the Government's standard spending assessment figures, Northumberland county council is expected to spend only £2,807 per pupil, compared with a figure of £4,553 for Kensington and Chelsea. There may well be differences between those areas. That is not under dispute. However, it is impossible for a council such as Northumberland to maintain the same education standards when the gap is so wide. We learn today that there is to be a 10 per cent. increase in council tax in Northumberland as a consequence of the settlement that the Government are dishing out.

I have heard recently from my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) that North Yorkshire has lost a further £500,000 from its funding this week. On Wednesday, the council agreed to passport all £12.9 million of the education SSA through to education, but that does not meet the extra costs of the standards fund, transport and special educational needs, so it has had to write to tell the head teachers to expect a 1.5 per cent. cut in their budgets and be prepared to sack teachers and support workers.

Jackie Ballard (Taunton): My hon. Friend will be aware that many councils will have large council tax rises and service cuts. Does he agree that the system of local government finance is so opaque that electors do not know whether they have an inefficient council or a mean Government?

Mr. Burstow: The pseudo-science of SSAs and the capping regime, under which councils do not know on what basis they are to be capped, mean that accountability is blurred and it is difficult for people to know whether they should write an angry letter to the Minister or try to vote their county councillor out of office.

North Yorkshire estimates that its council tax will have to rise by 9.7 per cent. Try explaining to people there why their council tax is going up by 9.7 per cent. while services are being cut and teachers are being sacked.

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): Does not the hon. Gentleman's argument mean that he should support the Government's moratorium on changes for three years while a more equitable system is worked out and agreed by all concerned?

Mr. Burstow: Part of my argument is that the settlement and the distribution methodology are still unsound. That is why we shall vote against the settlement. Stability in an unsound distribution system is not stability for those councils that will have to make cuts. Many hon. Members on both sides have clearly shown today that they face serious cuts to local services. However, Ministers say that there will be no cuts to front-line services. That is demonstrably untrue. Ministers must come out of the fantasy world of their fantasy figures and come into the real world, where cuts are being made to local services.

Mr. Gardiner: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Burstow: I am sorry, but I have already given way and I must make progress.

Ministers spent settlement day last December promising that council taxes would rise by just 4.5 per cent. That estimate was based on the national control totals rather than on local reality. Ministers tell us that they have to take an interest in controlling local spending because it is part of Government expenditure. As Lord Hunt's committee on relations between central and local government said, that is a Humpty Dumpty argument. International experience shows that the control of local government's self-financed expenditure is not critical to the success of the economy. Even in the UK, self-financed expenditure has been in and out of the control totals. As long as it remains part of the control totals, Whitehall will be calling the shots rather than the town hall, at the expense of local democracy.

As hon. Members have said, this year's settlement cannot be considered in isolation. The cumulative effect of years of inadequate settlement have taken their toll. In education, for example, the settlement announced in December 1997 left a £562 million funding gap between what had been passported to education and the cash provided by the Government. That left many councils struggling to balance their books and as a result, instead of falling, primary class sizes continued to increase.

The pressure to spend all the money that had been passported to education on education increased pressures on other services, so social services were in the front line for further cuts. It has been estimated that in the current financial year each social services department faced an average of £2.1 million in cuts. Nearly two out of three authorities increased charges, raising an additional £45 million and new charges were introduced raising a further £17 million. That money came out of the pockets of people who could not afford to pay, but as they needed the care, they had no choice. No Government ever acknowledge the cumulative effect of cuts, but it needs to be addressed otherwise core services will continue to be damaged.

It is not a good settlement for local government and nor is it a generous one, as Ministers would have us believe. It leaves community care for the elderly and disabled underfunded. It leaves councils to raid school budgets to fund the teachers' pay award. It leaves council tax payers bemused with bigger bills and poorer services and that is why we shall vote against it tonight.

5.41 pm

Mr. David Watts (St. Helens, North): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions and my hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and Housing on securing what is undoubtedly an excellent settlement for local government expenditure. I did not expect Opposition Members to support it. We all know that local elections are pending and we can all envisage the manifestos being rehearsed in today's speeches. However, I recognise that there are problems. Certainly 18 years of Tory Government have left local authorities with reduced powers, little financial self-control and low morale. Local authorities are now unable to respond to local community needs and as a result the number of people taking part in local elections has declined. This year's settlement will maintain services, will allow for some slight increases in expenditure on key services and will lead to some improvements.

On the crucial issue of fairness I do not believe that the settlement makes much progress on changing the grant system to make it fairer on local authorities such as St. Helens. However, before Opposition Members support that sentiment, I would point out that the Government inherited the present inadequate grant system from the previous Administration. It is very unfair and has undoubtedly reduced the powers and independence of local government. It has increased central control over council budgets and has massively increased local council taxes so it is hardly surprising that the Government face major problems in dealing with the legacy of 18 years of Tory Government.

The present system crammed more council resources into areas such as Westminster. There is no doubt about that. After two years, no Opposition Member has yet come to the Dispatch Box and apologised to the House and to the country for the corruption in Westminster council.

I am sad that we have not made more progress on fairness. The decision to kick the issue into the long grass for three years is most disturbing. I had honestly hoped that we could have made more progress and I am disappointed, as is my local authority. However, I am aware of the difficulties. I watched my hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and Housing on television recently. First she was criticised for not making enough changes to the system and then she was told that the changes that she had made were too severe. I understand that it is difficult to make changes. Obviously, people are concerned about the effects of this year's settlement on their local councils.

Many people in areas such as Barnsley and St. Helens want the Government to recognise that the unfairness has lasted, not for one year, but for 18 years. The massive differences in grant between authorities must be dealt with.

Moreover, the London lobby has been very strong. The *Evening Standard* has mounted a massive campaign about proposed changes to the education standard spending assessments. There is growing discontent in the north-west and Yorkshire about the weight thrown by the London press behind the lobby to maintain the status quo. The Government must understand that many people want and expect substantial changes to be made in the near future.

My local council in St. Helens is run well. It is praised by the district auditor, has fewer chief officers than most local authorities, and is an efficient and effective organisation. However, its council tax is high and there is a shortage of resources. That is not due to the way in which the council is run but to the grant system with which we have to live.

The Government want local government to make efficiency savings of 2 per cent. That will be exceedingly difficult for authorities such as St. Helens and Barnsley. It will not be so difficult for areas such as Westminster: I would rather make annual cuts of 10 per cent. in Westminster's expenditure than of 2 per cent. in St. Helens. Certain councils are awash with money, while others have very limited resources.

It is unfair to assert that, under the present grants system, each local authority should be treated the same. It will be virtually impossible for areas such as Barnsley to achieve the Government target. We have heard already that, despite this year's good settlement, there is likely to be an increase of 10 per cent. in Barnsley's council tax, and further cuts in provision are also probable. Given Barnsley council's massive efficiency savings over the past few years, that is not appropriate.

I shall briefly describe the problems that we face. How can it be fair for Westminster to be considered to be in greater need than Liverpool? How can Wandsworth be in greater need than Barnsley? How can Westminster get £1,000 more per child than St. Helens for the provision of education, and £150 per person more for cultural events? How can leafy Kensington and Chelsea get £150 more than St. Helens in SSAs?

The facts speak for themselves. The present system is corrupt and needs to be radically reviewed. Local government spending should be based first on the standard cost of service provision, then on the spending needs of each local authority. For example, if a school has lots of pupils who speak languages other than English, the amount of money devoted to that school should be based on the actual costs incurred, rather than on some theory put together by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Mr. Gardiner: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Watts: I hope that my hon. Friend will forgive me if I say no.

The introduction of factors such as poverty, unemployment and health into the equation is long overdue. One of the worst things that the previous Government did was to ignore unemployment and poverty. I hope that this Government's review will take such factors on board.

The present system means that many councils have high levels of council tax and poor levels of service, for no other reason than that the SSA system does not work in their favour. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and Housing will consider three requests. The first—which I was pleased to hear has already been conceded today—is that the Government come back every year to report on the progress achieved in the reviews that have been set up. The second request is for an assurance that the review will be completed and implemented in three years. I am aware that there will be

[Mr. Watts]

an election coming up around that time, and that it is probable that the issue will be left until afterwards: I should be grateful for an assurance to the contrary.

My final request has to do with housing benefit subsidy. My hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth (Mr. Healey) asked how many people supported the Government's proposal on housing benefit subsidy, and how many opposed it. The answer to the first question was none, and to the second that all the letters would be placed in the Library. I believe that there is a substantial number.

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): How many?

Mr. Watts: I do not know exactly how many; perhaps the Minister can enlighten us.

Some assurances would give authorities such as St. Helens some confidence that we will make progress. I do not underestimate the problems that any Government would have in trying to clear up the legacy left by the previous Government. However, I hope that my suggestions can be taken on board, and that there will be substantial progress as quickly as possible. I certainly hope to see changes within the next few months.

5.50 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley): I always enjoy the Secretary of State's presentations on local government finance. He is bluff, and he raises a smile. He also tries to cover up the underlying trends. The hon. Member for St. Helens, North (Mr. Watts) picked out one of those trends, and my right hon. Friend the Member for South–West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) noted it too. That trend is the tendency to move money out of London and the south-east in spite of difficulties there.

Last year, that movement was pretty blatant, and I was intrigued to find in this year's small print that it is even more blatant this time. Standard spending assessment was defined until this year as

"representing an appropriate level of budget requirement to provide a standard level of service".

However, paragraph 3.2 of "The Local Government Finance Report (England) 1999/2000" refers to the SSA calculation as follows:

"The calculation makes use of information reflecting demographic, physical and social characteristics of each area."

In other words, SSA means whatever Ministers want it to mean in the month in which they set the assessment. I should, of course, have expected that. The same subjective approach has been taken towards capping.

When the draft reports were announced, the Secretary of State took great pleasure in informing me that there would be an above-inflation increase for Surrey. By that, he meant Surrey county council, not the districts, and he neglected to point out a few disturbing factors. Almost all the increase went into the education SSA, and we have had letters pushing for effective hypothecation of that grant.

The Secretary of State did not say that the social services grant in Surrey has been severely damaged, and other hon. Members have noted the same for their areas. The community care grant has been cut by £6.5 million this year, a cut that entirely fails to recognise projects set in train this year that have continuing commitments into next year, and possibly beyond.

The grant changes have been offset to some degree. The means by which the Government are covering the trend is by a one-off, larger-than-usual distribution from the business rate pool for the district councils. That offset is a just one-off, however.

Even given the SSA for education, authorities will have to find money for such matters as class size increases. The Government want class sizes to reduce, but the school population increase counters that. Money will also be needed for the pay increase for teachers.

Surrey county council is a major preceptor on the districts that collect the council tax. Despite Surrey's enormous effort to find efficiency savings, the county's precept looks likely to rise by 8 to 9 per cent. That precept will be loaded on to districts in Surrey that have already been clobbered with a dramatic loss in real terms. Mole Valley district council's revenue support grant has gone down by 28 per cent. That reduction is covered this once by the increase in the business rate grant, but the prospects are bleak for the years after the one-off offset.

Surrey county council is not the only preceptor: Surrey police take a precept too.

The Minister for Local Government and Housing (Ms Hilary Armstrong): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Paul Beresford: I will not. I hope that the Minister does not mind, but I have only 10 minutes.

Surrey police have been hit quite severely. They got a nil cash increase. The increase that they got resulted from boundary changes in respect of the Metropolitan police authority's introduction. However, they have had to continue facing the pressures that were placed on them previously. The precept increase for the police alone is likely to be 13 to 14 per cent.

The Surrey police suffer from a unique and topical addition to those pressures. If the House of Lords decision goes the way that the Government appear to want in respect of a certain guest in this country—General Pinochet—Surrey may have to find an extra £1 million for his guest residency there. Perhaps we could move him somewhere further north. Pleas to the Home Office fell on deaf ears.

It is London where the particularly inspired activities have been going on. Underneath, London has been hit hard on the draft grant. As the hon. Member for St. Helens, North said, there were screams; that is an understatement. As a consequence, we got a special grant but it appears to be for only one year. The long-term prospect is grim.

Again we have difficulty in respect of precept. This goes back to the Metropolitan police. The Metropolitan Police Committee, now expanded by the Home Secretary's addition of Labour Councillors, got a report from the official receiver to the Metropolitan police on the Met's financial affairs. To keep a tight budget, the Met is introducing efficiency changes; I understand that there will be between 400 and 500 fewer policemen in the next financial year, including reductions in the special constabulary. As a result, the committee recommended a

precept increase of between 0 and 4 per cent. That did not appeal to the Home Secretary who, through the official receiver, requested a 9 per cent. increase.

The Metropolitan police has in many ways run a tight budget, particularly in respect of its balances, which it has successfully kept low. Now the official receiver tells us that the precept needs to be increased by 9 per cent. to put another £40 million into the balances. The excuse is that it is suddenly possible that a large number of middle-aged policemen—out of the blue if hon. Members will excuse the pun—will rush to retire. That is not reality. The probable reality is that this is the last opportunity for the Home Secretary to use a precept on the home counties, including Surrey, before the boundary change. It is also an opportunity for him to stuff the balances so that the mayor and the Greater London authority will have large funds sitting there at the expense of the people of London.

Time is short but the accusations against the Government of manoeuvring figures to suit themselves seem to be corroborated by the report before us, which I will emphatically oppose.

5.58 pm

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): It is with some reluctance that I join this debate, which is essentially a debate with good friends. I would rather be applauding, but it is important to bring to the House's attention the serious situation in Lancashire county council and to welcome the opportunity for review that lies ahead.

I confess an interest in that I worked for Lancashire county council for 15 years. I am pleased that my hon. Friend the extremely honourable Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman) is in her place. For some 16 years, she led Lancashire county council magnificently during—and this context is important—the most terrible times for local government. Local government was under sustained assault and public services were under threat. Lancashire county council held up a shield and strove to preserve decent standards, using balances and all sorts of devices, wit and ingenuity to support places of education and inspiration. It regenerated rundown industrial sites and paid for bus services to rural villages where no private company would go. It sheltered vulnerable people from the contemptible policies of the Conservative party.

Lancashire county council paid dearly for its actions. It was hammered with regular above-average reductions in grant-related expenditure assessments and SSAs, and then suffered an act of calculated malice. The worst of all possible reorganisations removed Blackpool and Blackburn, and left behind 11 districts and an incoherent structure that lacked any real identity. The reorganisation left the remnants of a shire county that was far removed from the typical profile, with large areas of real urban deprivation, as well as extensive rural areas with problems of neglect and sparsity. The county was forged in the industrial revolution and has an aging communications network, and bridges and moss roads that require fundamental reconstruction.

Lancashire has had long-standing financial problems in the past 10 years. It saw increases in SSA and grant-related expenditure assessment of 53 per cent., compared with 61 per cent. for the average county and 72 per cent. for England as a whole. Despite having a social profile more akin to that of metropolitan boroughs, the shire county had an SSA of £764 per head of population rather than the £862 of metropolitan districts. That is a long-winded way of saying that, despite last year's above average increase, the increase of £25 million in this year's education SSA and this year's increase of 4.5 per cent. against the shire county average of 5.2 per cent., we do not have enough funds to do what we desperately want to do. It is not enough to make up for the loss of grant and the previous use of balances, which are now completely depleted. The county, which was hammered during years of Tory Government, is in a desperate financial situation.

I would like the review to address the ways in which the calculation of SSAs seriously disadvantages Lancashire. For example, we would like to see education SSAs calculated and weighted according to pupil and school numbers. The educational needs index should take more account of low attainment and reduced variation between pupils. We would like to see interest receipts SSAs based on actual past interest receipts, rather than on the size of SSAs, because balances are so low.

I agree with many hon. Members: we would like to see a fairer resolution of area cost adjustments. I think that there is a real danger that the current methodology overstates the actual burden facing authorities in areas with higher labour costs. Without some changes, we will have a council tax of some £730 at band D—which is 37 per cent. higher than council tax for standard spending—and a council tax increase of 8.5 per cent., which means that we could lose £1 million in council tax benefit subsidy. I ask the Government to re-examine that issue.

We have seen cuts in the number of fire engines, and in resources and support for statemented pupils. There have been cuts in highway maintenance—road gritting was reduced this winter. We face possible cuts in the youth service and a consultation document contemplates breaking the long-standing principle that even the smallest rural schools should have at least two teachers. I deplore such proposals, as I deplored the cuts this financial year in the number of homes for older people.

That does not provide best value for local people, as taxpayers or customers, and it is not the quality of service provision that we should achieve under a Labour Government and a Labour county council. At a time when education in this country is being afforded the most wonderful opportunities in decades, I deplore the fact that a letter is circulating in Lancashire schools offering only the prospect of no change. Thanks to years of Conservative depredation, people working in the public services are desperate for change. I ask the Government to do more for Lancashire.

I also want Lancashire to do more for itself. There is an urgent need to modernise, to reduce bureaucracy, to decentralise decision making and trust some of the excellent people working at the coal face in public services, to listen to people and to respond to the real needs of the community. Lancashire needs the scrutiny that a great reforming Government, committed to improving standards, will bring. The task of modernising Lancashire and improving public services would be far easier, the crucial message about the Government's commitment to education, social services and other public services would be far clearer, and the great opportunity

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that the Labour Government present would be seized far more readily if the people of Lancashire had a little more help now.

6.6 pm

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): As far as Derbyshire is concerned, today's debate is held against a background of the capping imposed on Derbyshire county council earlier this year. The Government make great play of their getting rid of what they call crude and universal capping, but they are replacing crude and universal capping with a system that they are not prepared to define. The new system is to be fairer, nicer, lovey-dovey and more feely—no doubt, it will also be more understanding. However, they are the very Government who this year imposed the smallest cap ever on a local authority: £1 million off a budget of £470 million. The new Labour Government put that cap on Derbyshire.

So small is the cap that, for some authorities, rebilling cost almost as much again as the reduction set on those local authorities. In Amber Valley, rebilling council tax cost £85,000, whereas the reduction secured by that process was a mere £175,000. Those figures were confirmed to me today by the chief executive. In Derbyshire Dales, rebilling cost £29,000, whereas the overall reduction was £130,000. That is the background against which I see the Government's latest settlement.

I see the hon. Member for North–East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) in his place. He was unable to participate in the capping debate because of illness, so I am glad to see him back here today. At the last general election, numerous Labour Members of Parliament and candidates went up and down the county saying how different everything would be under a Labour Government. The area cost adjustment would be sorted out—evened out—so that there was fairness across the land. No more was the money to go to areas that benefited from the area cost adjustment and were supposedly being feather-bedded by the Tories.

It is interesting to look at what has happened in respect of the area cost adjustment, especially in primary schools. It is no good Labour Members blaming everything on the previous Conservative Government. I know they find it hard to understand, but I well understand that we have had a Labour Government for two years now, and the figures we are discussing are not Conservative figures. The figures are not the Conservatives' recommendations, but new Labour's recommendations to the House, which they will no doubt force through the House tonight.

In 1997-98, in Hertfordshire the SSA was £2,135 per pupil, whereas in Derbyshire it was £1,952: a difference—one that is largely owed to the area cost adjustment—of £183 per pupil. What do the latest figures show? Do they show that figure going down, or the area cost adjustment going down so that there is more equal distribution across the country? No. They reveal that the area cost adjustment is rising.

For several years, Derbyshire county council issued leaflets with its rates bills saying how awfully it was treated by the previous Conservative Government, how terrible was the difference in area cost adjustment and how the world would change when new Labour came into office: the universe would be nicer; the Derwent would flow with milk and honey and we would all go around smiling.

Mr. David Taylor (North–West Leicestershire): Not you.

Mr. McLoughlin: The hon. Gentleman is quite right—I am not smiling. That is because my constituents have been sold a false prospectus and they do not think that the Derwent flows with milk and honey because the area cost adjustment has increased instead of decreased.

Mr. Taylor: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. McLoughlin: No, I will not because of the 10-minute rule on speeches. Under the previous Government, there was a full day's debate on the local government finance motion, and I should have liked such a debate today.

When the Conservative Government were responsible for primary schools, the area cost adjustment was £183 per pupil and now it is £197. That increase has nothing to do with the previous Government and everything to do with the new Labour Government. The same is true for the area cost adjustment for secondary schools because in the last year for which the Conservatives were responsible for that, Hertfordshire's advantage over Derbyshire amounted to £224 per pupil. The latest figure, for 1999-2000, is £234 per pupil.

I am not the only person who feels disappointed about that. I received a letter that the headmaster of Queen Elizabeth's grammar school in Ashbourne sent to parents. [HON. MEMBERS: "Grammar school?"] Yes, a grammar school. I suggest that hon. Members come to Ashbourne because they would find that Queen Elizabeth's is a grammar school in name because of its foundation, but that it is a comprehensive school that takes pupils from every background. I dislike the way in which the words "grammar school" are regarded by Labour Members as swear words. It is true that the school is not in a catchment area to which the Prime Minister could send his children.

The headmaster said:

"The present Government pledged whilst in opposition to change the system of financing schools to make it more equitable. They have not done so. As a result my professional association, the Secondary Heads Association, has decided to join in a national campaign to secure a fair distribution of educational resources for all children. If you agree with me that it is wrong to deny your sons and daughters resources which are given to others, you may wish to join in this campaign."

It is estimated that if that school was funded on the same basis as schools in Hertfordshire, it would receive £278,000 more than it does at present. That is why I am annoyed and I cannot accept the proposals before the House today.

The Government tried to build up expectations and there is no point in anyone saying that they did not. I shall wait with great interest to read the leaflet issued with Derbyshire county council's rates demand to find out whether it will point out, as it did under the previous Government, how unfairly Derbyshire is being treated by the Government, although that would require the council to be consistent.

There has been a disturbing admission by the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister for Local Government and Housing—the hon. Lady has not yet made a speech,

but she did intervene earlier—that no meetings would be held this year because the Government had no intention of changing the methodology. She is nodding.

Ms Armstrong: I announced that in December.

Mr. McLoughlin: I want to be absolutely clear on this. Perhaps the Minister can help me. Does that mean that we will see no change over the next three years in the area cost adjustment? That is a very important question, to which we all want an answer.

Ms Armstrong *rose—*

Mr. McLoughlin: I cannot give way due to time.

For many years, Derbyshire county council has blamed Conservative Governments for school financing problems. I have always maintained—and still maintain—that school funding is much more complicated than that. It is far too complex and opaque. The result, which everybody can see, is that schools and parents are caught in a web of statistics, on which everyone involved puts their own interpretation. I urge the Government to do something about that.

6.16 pm

Mr. Derek Twigg (Halton): I have a somewhat different perspective on this debate, which I shall elucidate.

We must recognise the importance of local government and the crucial, pivotal role that it plays in delivering many of our election pledges. Local authorities' important role in bringing about the improvements that we want—a better society and better local government—cannot be underestimated.

My council, Halton, is one of the new unitary authorities, which are very much in the front line for raising standards in schools and providing better services for young and old alike. Like many councils, Halton plays a pivotal role in other issues, such as introducing the new deal and the partnership within it. Many demands are therefore placed on its time and resources. It has responded positively, flexibly and innovatively to initiatives that the Government have launched. I want to explain why the local government grant settlement is a good one, and show by way of the example of Halton how the Government's approach to local government finance is making a positive difference in my constituency.

My authority is one of the 50 most socially deprived local authority areas in England and Wales. The need to provide better services, especially by raising educational standards and helping children via social services, is vital. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister said that this is one of the most generous local government settlements since the introduction of the council tax. I have no hesitation in supporting the Government's view. The settlement was good for Halton this year, and will be good for it in the coming year, too. We cannot separate the two.

The approach to local government finance, certainly for Halton, has been good. There is clear and tangible evidence that the Government are making a positive difference to the lives of my constituents. More resources have been—and are being—made available. There is clear water between the previous Government's negative approach and the positive approach of this Government. For instance, under the previous Government, the settlement increased in 1995-96 by only 0.5 per cent. But for 1999-2000, the increase will be 5.5 per cent. The message from this settlement is that the Government want to support local government in improving the quality of services.

In Halton, we have seen an increase in standard spending assessment of 5.9 per cent. It will be spending above its SSA on education—spending £2 million extra on schools. School budgets will be increased and youth services will be better funded, as will adult education. That cannot be separated from other Government initiatives on education. My authority has received more than £2 million in successful standards fund bids. We have seen an increase in the allocation for professional development, and new classrooms. The effect of that on head teachers was fantastic. They have been after the extra money for many years, and it has made a positive difference.

There were five literacy and numeracy schemes in my constituency over the summer. One of them was the very first to integrate special needs children and children from mainstream schools. To see the determination of children on those schemes to achieve something and better themselves was fantastic. The council has also run several projects on social exclusion, and much more.

There has also been a good increase in annual capital guidelines. The need for more school places is recognised, especially in Widnes, the largest area in my constituency.

I am pleased that we have had a large increase in personal social services this year. The increase of 24 per cent. for children's social services is particularly important and recognises the inequalities under the previous system. Areas like mine have a high degree of social deprivation and difficulties in terms of the number of single parents, children living in poverty, and overcrowding. That has been a major determining factor in the allocation of extra resources, which are very welcome in my constituency.

I shall refer briefly to another respect in which the settlement shows the difference between the previous Government and the present one. People who know the north-west know that one of the great landmarks is the Widnes-Runcorn bridge. It is regularly jammed with traffic, because it was not built for the amount of traffic that uses it—we need a new bridge. The existing bridge needs extra maintenance and support. The previous Government and the previous county council did not fund that, but this Government have recognised the problem and have increased the transport programmes from £1 million to £3 million, which will go a long way towards dealing with the problems associated with the bridge. That is another example of the difference that the Government are making.

We cannot separate this year's announcement from last year's or from the other initiatives that the Government have taken. One of those involves capital receipts. For the first time, there has been a relaxation on capital receipts. The previous Government would not do that. Housing Ministers used to blame the Treasury. In Halton, the relaxation on capital receipts has meant an extra £2.2 million, much of which has been spent on

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modernising houses, which had stopped under the previous Government, and on central heating programmes.

The settlement is good for council tax payers in Halton, where the council tax increase this year will be in line with the Government's guidelines. The council tax will also probably be, as it was last year, the second or third lowest in the north-west.

When I was the chair of finance on my borough council, and previously the chair of housing, it used to frustrate me no end—and every other councillor—that we could not plan for future years. We had no idea from one year to the next what settlement we would get. That was difficult not just for us as councillors, but for the people whom we served. Numerous minor changes would be made from one year to the next, which could not be explained away and caused even more problems. Now we have stability for the next three years and the ability to plan, which is a massive step forward and one of the most welcome aspects of the Government's approach to local government finance.

There have been important changes to capping. Universal capping has been removed. The Government are retaining some powers in that regard, which is sensible. I support their position. The previous Government would not countenance any change in capping, whereas this Government have listened and moved a fair way down the road.

Many hon. Members who have spoken in the debate have mentioned problems in their areas. Clearly, the system must be fairer. It will never be fairer to everyone—that would be impossible to achieve—but much progress has been made. There are many issues relating to housing benefit, for example, that affect my constituents, because there are so many housing association houses in the Halton area.

Change takes time, and it is not unreasonable to expect us to be patient. There is some way to go yet. The Government have made a clear commitment to examine the issues, and they have made a good start. I welcome the local government settlement. Local government must modernise itself, give best value and ensure that its services are best directed at those whom it serves, at a price that they are willing to pay.

Mr. Lansley: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Twigg: I am sorry—I have finished.

6.24 pm

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): The hon. Member for Halton (Mr. Twigg) says that this is a good settlement. He might like to come and explain that to people in Oxfordshire where, as a consequence of this year's settlement, families on income support who have children with learning difficulties will have to pay for day-care provision.

At the last general election, I predicted that if there were a Labour Government, counties such as Oxfordshire would be hard hit. If one examines this year's settlement, one sees that local authorities in the south have been hit, shire counties have been hit, and rural areas have been hit; so a shire county in the south that is predominantly rural, like Oxfordshire, is triply hit. The proof is there. Even the shire county SSA average increase is 5.2 per cent. this year. Oxfordshire simply has 3.8 per cent.—one of the lowest awards in the country.

This year, social services have £1 million more, but last year they had £1 million less. So in cash terms this coming year Oxfordshire will have to cope with what it had way back in 1997. In Oxfordshire, we face the possible closure of a number of day centres for the elderly and respite care centres for those with learning difficulties, and massive reductions in social service provision. The social service provision will be decimated.

Immediately after the settlement, the Minister for Local Government and Housing said on Radio 4 that no council should have to raise its council tax by more than 4.5 per cent. The Labour budget proposed for Oxfordshire county council would see a council tax rise of 12.5 per cent. Even that would not enable Oxfordshire county council to spend its SSA on education, and there would still be substantial cuts in social services. The Labour budget would see a council tax increase of some £285.

The Conservatives have sought to table an indicative budget, which they branded Blair's budget, which the county council would have to introduce if it tried to stick as close as possible to the Government's pronouncement of a council tax increase of 4.5 per cent. That would mean that spending on education was still below SSA, but social services provision would be decimated, like other budgets.

In Oxfordshire, families on income support now have to pay for basic services and the county surveyor has told parish councils that the budget cuts effectively mean that the minor road network will not be resurfaced for at least 50 years. A number of villages are now surrounded by failed road signs. The village of Piddington outside Bicester now has a number of failed road signs.

As a consequence of this year's settlement, hundreds of the most vulnerable people in Oxfordshire will suffer, and throughout the county the infrastructure will increasingly crumble. Most people will find it difficult to understand how the Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities could say, the day after the settlement, that the people in Oxford and the rest of the county could expect steadily improving services. They clearly will not be able to.

When I intervened on the Deputy Prime Minister on the day that the announcement was made, he said that this year's settlement represented the best deal that Oxfordshire has had for years. I suspect that that will be emblazoned above the door of every closed day and respite care centre and every failing old people's home. Never before in the history of Oxfordshire county council has that come about.

This settlement for shire counties such as Oxfordshire means higher taxes and fewer services. It is a unique combination of the tax and the axe. Labour's settlement is an attack on the most vulnerable people in Oxfordshire. We shall see a substantial hike in our council tax bills and at the same time basic services in Oxfordshire will be decimated.

The settlement is a disgrace to the Government. I suspect that many people in Oxfordshire who voted Labour at the last general election will now be regretting it; that will be clearly demonstrated in the local government elections later this year. There can be no

justification for this settlement, and no justification for its impact on Oxfordshire. I therefore hope that hon. Members, and many people, will vote against this monstrous settlement.

6.30 pm

Mr. Tony Clarke (Northampton, South): I will be brief, not because of the time limit, but because I would not be making such a contribution were I as satisfied as some of my hon. Friends in respect of their settlements. I also believe that, the longer I am on my feet, the greater the chance of my saying something that I might regret at a later date. The Minister would expect a certain amount of criticism. It has been, is and always will be the case that those who receive the lowest settlements will plead their case, but I will try to be constructive and balanced in that criticism.

I of course recognise that this is probably one of the best settlements for a long time—for seven years, the Deputy Prime Minister said—and that the 5.5 per cent. average increase is to be welcomed. However, those at the lower end of that average—the losers—start to feel a little like someone at a party who is stone cold sober, and wondering what all the fun is about, when everyone else is drunk.

Northampton borough council, whose area is in my constituency, has been treated particularly badly and has a paltry 1.1 per cent. increase. The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions says that the average council tax increase should be 4.5 per cent., if councils were spending to the average increase in their standard spending assessment. There would be a doubling effect in Northampton. Not only do we have one of the lowest settlements, but we would probably have had to levy a higher council tax because of the problem of continual cutback over a number of years and our inability to deliver to the people of Northampton the services that they expect.

I acknowledge that Northamptonshire county council and South Northamptonshire council, whose areas are in my constituency, have done a little bit better, but that makes it even harder to accept that Northampton borough council has been left in such a position. Northampton has been badly treated for four reasons; two are directly related to the formula and the way that the figures have been calculated, and two are broader, but equally significant.

I have told the Minister on a number of occasions that I believe that Northampton continues to suffer, as the largest non-unitary district council in England. A population of 200,000 means that we are simply in the wrong club, and we should not be there with our district council colleagues. Northampton should have achieved unitary status when its neighbours—Milton Keynes, Leicester, Derby and Nottingham—achieved it; because of that, the town aspires to unitary status but has to accept, at the moment, that its budget of £19.1 million is not enough to meet the aspirations of its people.

Some may say that economies of scale could be made, but that would not work in Northampton because the population data used by the Department is not only outdated, but continually out of date. Northampton is still the third-fastest growing town in Europe. The DETR figure for the population is 194,000. The council accepts the figure of 198,000, but the population is already probably more than 200,000.

Each year, between 2,000 and 2,500 homes are constructed in Northampton. Each year, they bring with them additional burdens for the council, which has to provide additional services. I give an example of that effect. On this year's settlement, we will be paid only for the 194,000 people who the Department recognise as living in the town, but we will have to provide services for the 198,000 or more people who live there. We will also have to find, in the next 12 months, an additional £135,000, simply for refuse collection and street cleaning, for the 3,000 people who will move on to new estates and into new areas between now and next year's settlement.

In respect of the changes to the methodology on capital financing, I also believe that Northampton has been particularly hard hit: 5 per cent. of our £19.1 million budget—£545,000—has disappeared, because of that one change. We pleaded with the Minister that a council such as Northampton, which has been hit so badly by one factor, should be able to phase the change in. We should be able to manage that transition over a longer period, so that it will not have such devastating effect on the budget.

I make no excuse for mentioning the impact that the Easter floods of last year had on Northampton. Even after the money provided by the Bellwin scheme and the insurance costs that were paid, the council faces £300,000 in costs that it knows it cannot recover. Because 2,500 homes were flooded, it was impossible to collect council tax from homes that were uninhabitable. That alone has cost us £500,000.

Given the time, I must cut short my comments. Let me simply ask my hon. Friend the Minister to understand Northampton's difficulties better, and to understand my continuing disquiet, both as a constituency MP and as one who is still a member of Northampton borough council, about the fact that, given that paltry 1.1 per cent., we may be unable to deliver the services that she would want us to deliver. I am sure that, if she understands that, she will understand why I cannot support the settlement until I feel that it is fairer to Northampton and its council tax payers.

Mr. Lansley rose—

Mr. Gardiner: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Can it be right that, of the three hours available for discussion of the local government settlement, an hour and 25 minutes will have been taken up by the opening and closing speeches from the two Front Benches, and—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, and I entirely understand the point that he is trying to make, but this is the way the House always conducts business of this kind. The time that hon. Members take for their speeches is largely a matter for them, and time is now being taken from the time that is left for debate.

6.36 pm

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): If the hon. Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) has an objection, he should raise it with his Front Bench. Last year, five hours and two minutes were allowed for this debate, and in the preceding nine years never was less than five hours and 20 minutes allowed. This year, the time has been reduced to two hours and 49 minutes.

[Mr. Andrew Lansley]

It is clear from the three speeches that we have just heard why the Government do not want a long debate on this subject. The hon. Member for Halton (Mr. Twigg) is in a minority of one on the Labour Benches in applauding the settlement. Why does he applaud it?

Mrs. Ellman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Lansley: No; I have no time.

I will tell the House why the hon. Member for Halton applauds the settlement. The hon. Member for Northampton, South (Mr. Clarke), for example, spoke of methodology changes, and the Government's political fix which meant shifting money from shire areas and London to metropolitan areas: 2.9 per cent. has been lost in Northampton in methodology changes. My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) spoke of Oxfordshire, where a 4.8 per cent. increase in the control total was reduced to 3.8 per cent., simply because of the SSA methodology changes. The hon. Member for Halton is happy, however. Why is he happy? Because the control total increase of 4.1 per cent. was increased to 5.9 per cent. by the changes in SSA methodology. That proves the point that my right hon. Friend the Member for South–West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) was making about the shift from the shires and London to the metropolitan districts.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Lansley: No.

That is why the hon. Member for Halton is happy, and others are not.

Mr. Love *rosé*—

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Lansley: I shall give way to the hon. Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love), because it would be discourteous not to do so.

Mr. Love: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I am not sure whether it is premature to welcome him to the Front Bench, but I do so in any case.

The right hon. Member for South–West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) welcomed the 7.2 per cent. increase for education. Will the hon. Gentleman now take the opportunity to welcome the 5.5 per cent. overall increase in spending on local government in the coming year?

Mr. Lansley: In the few minutes left to me, I shall make it clear that although the Government have increased spending for local authorities, they have not kept in touch with the current changes in spending pressures. Let me give an example. There has been a £2 billion increase in aggregate external finance in England, but an extra £130 million must be spent by local government because of the change in advance corporation tax. It would have been £230 million but for the changes in actuarial calculations. At least £100 million, probably more, will have to be spent on the millennium bug, and £80 million will have to be spent on landfill tax. Anyone who knows about waste will know that will be compounded by the increased cost of waste charges. The working time directive and the minimum wage will cost £200 million. Then there is the overhang of teachers' pay settlements, and the £70 million extra that is unfunded. If we add all that together, we realise that at least £600 million is being taken out of the £2 billion.

Mr. Pickles: In his brief speech so far, my hon. Friend has explained where the £33 million by which Essex county council is short to fund its services adequately, has gone.

Mr. Lansley: Absolutely. Essex has exactly the same experience as Cambridgeshire. Although we have an increase, spending pressures are such that we will end up with a 10 per cent. increase in council tax. The Government's policies will lead to a higher council tax and a loss of services.

My hon. Friends the Members for Wantage (Mr. Jackson) and for Banbury instanced that in relation to Oxfordshire. My hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) spoke of Dorset and my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) spoke strongly of the impact on schools in Somerset. The hon. Member for Leicester, South (Mr. Marshall) perhaps put it best when he described it as another abysmal year.

The impact is on council tax in the first instance. Last year, the average increase was 8.6 per cent.; this year, the Treasury estimates a 7.5 per cent. increase. If we put the two together, in the two years to 2000 the Government will preside over increases in council tax that are three times the rate of inflation. The Government are again introducing stealth taxes through local government taxation. Within the settlement, much has not been done, and that deserves our criticism. The Government have significantly failed to grasp important nettles. My right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) spoke strongly of the failure to remedy unreasonable deficits and disparities in funding for local education authorities. Work should be done on the additional educational needs index and on pupil weighting.

Likewise, my hon. Friend the Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin), the right hon. Member for Ashton–under–Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) and the hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) spoke strongly about the need to do something about the area cost adjustment. I understand that, because Cambridgeshire is one of those councils that is beyond the cliff edge in terms of the adjustment. The Deputy Prime Minister says that it is difficult. Three days before the last general election, the Prime Minister, when asked the question, "What are you going to do about it?" did not say, "It is difficult"; he said, "I am going to review it and change it for the year 1998-99."

The Prime Minister did not change it for the year 1998-99. He is not changing it for 1999-2000—he is freezing an unfair distribution system for a further three years. To compound the error of his ways, the Deputy Prime Minister says that Ministers will not take deputations on the subject—they will not listen to the arguments. All the material is being presented through examination of the area cost adjustment, but they will not deal with it.

Through the settlement, the Government have brought further errors into the system. Crude and universal capping is the subject of debate in relation to the Local Government Bill; I suspect that crude and universal capping is precisely what will arise from the powers that the Government are taking through the Bill. However, through the council tax benefit subsidy limitation we have something that is equally crude and universal.

The criticism by the hon. Members for Normanton (Mr. O'Brien) and for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) was right. As a consequence of the settlement, some of the poorer councils will have to raise council taxes by more than 4.5 per cent. A significant part of that money will be raised from poor people in their areas. In fact, money will be taken away to subsidise council tax benefit for those who are unable to pay council tax. It is an iniquitous clawback system.

Within that, there is a further iniquity. Councils that spend below SSA—and South Cambridgeshire spends 23 per cent. below it—will be penalised in the same way, although its budget is well below that which the Government regard as necessary for providing services.

Time is short. By keeping the debate so short, the Government have limited the opportunities for hon. Members on both sides of the House to draw out the problems with the settlement.

The size of the settlement hides a reality. Over two years, council tax rises will be three times the rate of inflation. There has been no response to spending pressures. Service improvements that might otherwise have been achieved will be bled away in the cost pressures that are being placed on local government, principally through Government changes: a political fix that shifts money out of shire areas and London into metropolitan areas will damage services in many important regions in a way that is iniquitous and at odds with Deputy Prime Minister's initial statement that the settlement was nothing to do with councils' political complexion. Well, perhaps not—yet the damage that will be caused to certain areas of the country by the Government's methodological changes makes clear their intention.

We are looking at a system which is taking money and piling it into some of the councils that are the most likely to waste it rather than to spend it successfully on good services. It is the traditional Labour policy of increasing taxes and piling it into the waste. It is as though the Government have come to the House saying, "Look how wonderful we are. We have turned on the taps and the water is pouring out." Unfortunately, they have left out the plug. It is our responsibility, in the short time available, to tell the Government where the settlement has gone wrong and to oppose it.

6.45 pm

The Minister for Local Government and Housing (Ms Hilary Armstrong): We have had an interesting debate about a settlement which, despite what hon. Members have said, is the best overall for seven years. It is the most generous settlement since the introduction of council tax and it is fair to all councils, not fixed in the interests of one or two. We have learnt quickly that, however much the settlement is, there will always be arguments about why it should be more and why different areas have different priorities. Of course, we must continue to look at that and we will be doing so.

Conservative Members need to remember the miserable local government settlements that they heaped on all of local government before they venture into criticism this year. Education and social services authorities, whether in rural areas or urban England, have done well as we honour our pledges to raise standards in education and improve health and social services. We have made some changes to the way the formula is calculated so that it better reflects the findings from research into local need and patterns of service delivery.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): The hon. Lady is talking about fairness. East Devon district council has no debt. It is so efficiently run that there is no long-term indebtedness. Despite that, its grant was cut last year, and this year it has not been restored to the level that existed before the Labour party took office. How can that be fair?

Ms Armstrong: The right hon. Gentleman will admit that Devon county council has an increased award this year, which represents the Government's commitment to putting money into education and social services.

In any formula-based system, change means winners and losers—of course it does. This year, to make sure that those changes can be phased in, we have made special provision to ensure that no council will lose grant next year compared to this year. That applies to East Devon too.

Every education and social services authority will receive at least 1.5 per cent. extra in grant next year. As my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister made clear, the settlement provides for £2.6 billion of extra spending—an increase of 5.5 per cent. on last year. That extra money comes with strings attached. It is money for modernisation and for improving the quality of services provided by local councils to their public. Some councils—we have heard this today—may be tempted to use the extra money to restore past cuts and to deal with past problems. I urge them to think again and to use the new resources to look forwards, not backwards. They should plan for new patterns of service to meet the needs of local people today and tomorrow.

Councils now have three years of financial stability to plan and deliver the modernisation of their services. They can use them creatively to restructure services over the medium term and to achieve best value, safe in the knowledge that, for the first time, the Government have set out a three-year funding package.

The Government have made it clear that there will be no methodology changes in the next three years—during which we want to examine the current methodology to determine whether it can be improved. Simultaneously, we want to determine whether there is a system for distributing grant that is much fairer than the standard spending assessment methodology.

I should tell my hon. Friend the Member for St. Helens, North (Mr. Watts) that he would have an opportunity to contribute properly not only to such a review but to his authority. We should think not only about additional educational needs and area cost adjustment, but about whether we can introduce a fairer system of redistribution.

Jackie Ballard: In the next three years, councils will face the council tax benefit subsidy limitation. The Minister received no letters in support of that proposal,

[Jackie Ballard]

and 119 letters opposed to it, including one from her own Labour-controlled Durham county council. How will she respond to them?

Ms Armstrong: In the same way as I have responded to the House today—*[Interruption.]* We disagree with them. Consultation does not entail agreeing with everyone. I should not have expected any council to say that it was in favour of—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps the hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) does not want to hear the answer.

I should not expect any council to say that it was in favour of the limitation, as it raises the issue of balancing funding from central taxation and from local taxation. Council tax benefit is currently funded from central taxation. We believe that there should be a balance and are giving local councils responsibility for a small element of it.

I reject entirely any suggestion that the settlement is biased in favour of one type of authority or another. I was staggered at the comments on rural areas made by the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard). Her county is in a rural area. This year, it received a 6.2 per cent. increase in addition to other specific grants for rural areas, for transport and other rural services. She knows that that is true, and that she was simply being disingenuous.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) complained about Essex, which received the largest cash increase.

Mrs. Shephard: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Armstrong: I shall give way in a moment. First, I should like to say some things to the right hon. Lady, who was plainly out of her depth.

The right hon. Lady said that Norfolk received the worst settlement in its history, which—as she knows—was plain wrong. She said that Birmingham received the biggest increase, which also was wrong. Although Birmingham is the largest authority, it received an overall 4 per cent. increase, which hon. Members will know was not the biggest in the country.

The right hon. Member for South–West Norfolk is prepared to throw mud in the hope that it sticks. The Government will deal with the facts, which she has not quite caught up with yet.

Mrs. Shephard: Does the hon. Lady deny the contents of her own table, which shows the reductions for shire areas?

Ms Armstrong: There are not reductions but increases for shire areas—including hers—of 6.2 per cent. Conversely—when was it?—in 1995 or 1996, when the right hon. Lady was in the Cabinet, her Government gave Norfolk county council 0.5 per cent. less than it had received the year before. This year, Norfolk may not have received the increase that the right hon. Lady wanted, but it certainly received a big increase over last year.

Mr. Lansley: Will the hon. Lady simply recognise the fact that, in the coming year—purely because of methodological changes, on top of last year's similar changes—£43 million will be taken from shire areas, £39 million will be taken from London, and £83 million extra will go to metropolitan areas?

Ms Armstrong: The hon. Gentleman does not understand. The overall amount going in is greater. It may be less than if we had made no changes, but it is still a huge increase. How much would you have given?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady must remember that she is addressing the Chair.

Ms Armstrong: How much would the Conservatives have given? We are talking about the distribution of the biggest grant since the introduction of council tax. That is not a reduction; it is an increase.

Brent has had a difficult settlement, but we said that we had to re-order matters to achieve greater fairness. Brent tells me that it is the 20th poorest borough in the country. It is, but it has the 18th highest SSA per head in the country.

Mr. Gardiner: My hon. Friend has listened carefully to Brent's representations over the past weeks and I thank her for that. I also thank her for the extra £2.5 million that she has put in. Will the Government consider rescheduling the debt repayments on the £8.4 million of housing revenue account subsidy that was overpaid under the Conservatives between 1992 and 1995, to give Brent some desperately needed breathing space?

Ms Armstrong: I am sure that Brent will want to come to us and ask for that. I cannot answer that today because it is not an issue for the settlement.

My hon. Friend the Member for Normanton (Mr. O'Brien) was right to say how generous the settlement is. The council tax benefit subsidy limitation scheme does not hit poorer areas harder. It protects the poorest areas by treating them the same as the average areas.

The right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) takes the biscuit. He complains that North Yorkshire did not receive damping grant to bring its grant up to the 1.5 per cent. increase. We used the same principles as his Government, damping on the overall settlement and not on individual methodological changes. North Yorkshire has got 4.7 per cent.

I appreciate the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, South (Mr. Marshall) about the difficulties that his authority faces. It is working hard to overcome them.

Let me turn to the Liberal Democrats. I remind them—*[Interruption.]* They do not want to hear it. In their manifesto, they said that they would spend £1.8 billion per year to a total of £5 billion over three years. Just for the next three years, the Government have committed £19 billion. We have already spent more than they committed for the whole Parliament. They said that they would spend an extra £700 million on health to a total of £2 billion over three years. The Government have committed £21 billion. Either they were not telling us the truth then or they are not telling us the truth today. The Liberal Democrats said today that the gap was

£1.7 billion. *The Guardian* says that few independent local government analysts agreed that the gap would be that big. The Liberal Democrats need to do some work.

In 1994–95, when the hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) was in government, Oxfordshire county council got 0.5 per cent. less than it had the previous year. Maybe that is why it has problems this year.

The settlement is the most generous since the introduction of the council tax. There is more money for modernising services, new protection for the council tax payer, better services—

It being Seven o'clock, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *put the Question, pursuant to Order [1 February].*

Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 272, Noes 140.

Division No. 58] **[7 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fatchett, Derek
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine (Morecambe & Lunesdale)
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*

Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Graham Allen and Mrs. Anne McGuire.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Hawkins, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lidington, David
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Oliver Heald and Mr. Tim Collins.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Local Government Finance Report (England) 1999–2000 (HC 143), which was laid before this House on 1st February, be approved.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *then put the remaining Questions required to be put at that hour.*

Resolved,

That the Local Government Finance (England) Special Grant Report (No. 37) (HC 144), which was laid before this House on 1st February, be approved.

That the Local Government Finance Report (England) 1997–98: Amending Report 1999 (HC 145), which was laid before this House on 1st February, be approved.—[*Mr. Betts.*]

National Lottery

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

That the draft Apportionment of Money in the National Lottery Distribution Fund Order 1999, which was laid before this House on 20th January, be approved.—[*Mr. Betts.*]

The House divided: Ayes 252, Noes 129.

Division No. 59] **[7.14 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cranston, Ross
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*

Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fatchett, Derek
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Spellar, John
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Graham Allen and
Mrs. Anne McGuire.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Ballard, Jackie
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Hawkins, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lidington, David
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Öpik, Lembit
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David

Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Oliver Heald and
Mr. Tim Collins.

Question accordingly agreed to.

FOOD STANDARDS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith,

That a select committee of thirteen Members be appointed to report on the draft bill on the Food Standards Agency (Cm. 4249);

That Ms Diana Organ, Ms Sally Keeble, Audrey Wise, Dr. Howard Stoate, Dr. Lewis Moonie, Mr. Martyn Jones, Mr. Kevin Barron, Dr. Stephen Ladyman, Mr. Owen Paterson, Mr. David Curry, Mr. Robert Walter, Dr. Peter Brand and the Reverend Martin Smyth be members of the Committee;

That the Committee have power

(a) to send for persons, papers and records;

(b) to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House;

(c) to adjourn from place to place within the United Kingdom;

(d) to appoint specialist advisers; and

(e) to communicate to any select committee of either House their evidence and any other documents relating to matters of common interest; and

That the Committee shall report by 31st March 1999.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): Object.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): The motion cannot be proceeded with if it is opposed.

Sir Peter Emery: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Do you not think that there is something very wrong with appointing a Select Committee when the Government have already announced—I think quite wrongly—that a £90 fee will be imposed across the board on all food outlets, irrespective of size or location?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman knows as well as I do that the motion is not debatable in any way. That is not a point of order.

Motorway Bridges

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

7.24 pm

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): I thank Madam Speaker for granting me this Adjournment debate. It is a measure of new Labour that the cry is no longer, "To the barricades!" but, "To the parapets!" However, the issue is an important one. I would describe this as my Bridge of Sighs debate, although the bridges in question and the view from them are not as attractive as their Venetian counterpart.

I, my constituents, and many thousands of people throughout the country sigh with dismay when we see the size of bridge parapets. The debate arises from the bridges recently constructed in my constituency, but it has national implications. The M11 link road is still being built in my constituency, through Leyton, Leytonstone and Wanstead. That is a built-up, well-populated—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has started his Adjournment debate and his time is precious. I should be grateful if hon. Members continued their conversations outside the Chamber.

Mr. Cohen: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. My constituency is a built-up, well-populated urban area and the M11 link road has given local residents all sorts of unpleasant surprises. They have not been consulted on many aspects of the project, their complaints are often ignored, and the local environment has been devastated with little recompense or remedial measures.

However, the bridge parapets are a considerable shock, being low and dangerous. Where Blake Hall road, Wanstead and Gainsborough road, Leytonstone cross the speeding motorway below, the parapets are only slightly more than 3 ft high—hip level for the average pedestrian. At Cathall bridge, where there are major housing estates, the parapets are only a little higher. I have received many letters from local residents expressing grave concerns. I have not publicised this debate locally, but Hugh Jones of Wanstead wrote to me only this week saying, initially with sarcasm:

"Naturally, like other Link Road fans, I have been greatly reassured by the Highways Agency's comforting assertion that, despite the fears of very many residents, this bridge is safe and, at 3 ft 4 in, over a 50 ft drop, conforms absolutely to national standards. Even as I write I can hear the cheers of relief echoing down the caverns of the still-uncompleted George Green tunnel.

But why is it then that beside Leyton Tube station another Link Road bridge has a parapet which comes up to my shoulder—a height of at least 5 ft, I would guess. Do they have a different national standard in London E10 from the one applying in London E11? Or do they simply think that the people of Leyton are much more likely to jump? And why don't the people of Wanstead apparently deserve the same heights of care and consideration?"

Here are the views of Mrs. Jayham, who wrote:

"I am very concerned at the low level of the railings . . . Could you please investigate and let me know if they conform to Health and Safety standards? I think it is very important to safeguard the safety of pedestrians."

Mrs. Helen Bostock writes:

"For many months now I have been very worried about the safety of this bridge and have been into the Link Office to express my concern—to no avail. Thank you for your efforts—I hope Glenda Jackson will visit the site and see the dangers for herself."

Jeanne Hayes says:

"I just want to know my children will be safe as they cross the M11 Link Road on their way to Wanstead High School. All it needs is some children to be fooling around or a bully pushing a youngster against the side for an accident to happen."

Louise Buchanan of the Leytonstone 2000 forum says of the low railings:

"I don't know how they got away with it. Everything has been done on the cheap. If this was Hampstead or Highgate, I'm sure that things would be excellent . . . the bridge is used by a lot of children going to Leytonstone School. I'm not saying that they will throw anything on the road, but the temptation is there. If anything like a carrier bag of rubbish is thrown on to the road when there are cars there, it could cause a pile-up. And if anyone wants to throw themselves off, it would be easy."

Mr. Larry Golding warns:

"The danger to both children and adults must be obvious to all but the blind and indifferent. In addition projectiles of any sort, by accident or design, will cause a disaster or at least serious injury. I can conceive no logical reason for some form of protection high enough to afford better protection"

not being installed.

The link road project manager replied to earlier complaints saying:

"I believe pedestrians using the bridge should feel comfortable because of the extra wide footways provided (3.6 m compared to the standard 1.5 m)."

My constituent Douglas L. Staudte commented:

"The width of the pavement is not in question, although if it was 100 yards wide the parapet would still be low at 3 ft 4 in. I cannot understand the thinking behind it. There is no view to be enjoyed that a higher parapet would obscure. It's a temptation to some idiots to act the fool. It is alarming to look at and a fall would be certain death, if not from the impact then from speeding traffic."

I recount the recent experience of my wife and myself on a bridge with a low parapet when we visited an Essex town. A boy, aged about 10, was wheeling his younger brother in a pushchair over a bridge. The younger boy kept leaving the pushchair, removing his coat and running to the side of the bridge. His older brother kept struggling to bring him back and return him to his coat and the pushchair. My wife and I froze at the end of the bridge as the scene was played out about three times, and I was ready to run on to the bridge if they came close to disaster. Those kids were behaving as kids do; it was the low parapet that made an accident possible.

I have written to the Minister suggesting that she or one her staff visits the Blake Hall road bridge. Plain common sense screams out that those low parapets are not safe.

The replies to the complaints are brief. They repeat that the height complies with the national standard. I have examined that standard, which is contained in section 2.19 of the Highways Agency document BD52/93. The minimum height for a pedestrian parapet is 1,000 mm, which is 3 ft 3.4 in. A footbridge parapet, except over a railway, is a little higher at 1,150 mm. On all bridges over railways, parapets must be 1,250 mm high or, in some circumstances, 1,500 mm. Interestingly, the minimum height for a parapet on a bridleway is 1,800 mm, which is probably just the right height to fall or be thrown from a horse.

The footbridge standard is low, but why is it higher than the standard for pedestrian parapets in urban areas? The standard is higher for bridges over railways. Are motorists' lives deemed to be less important? In my constituency, London Underground has insisted that the bridges over the Central line be covered by tunnels. That implies a wish to avoid debris coming from bridges. If that is the case for the tube, why not for the motorway? After regurgitating the national standard justification, the Minister at least added the caveat,

"unless you have any evidence to the contrary".

First, what is the evidence for that national standard? Apparently, it has been in place since the 1960s. Where did it come from? When was it last reviewed? Has there been any public consultation about it? What recent trends in public safety requirements have been taken into account?

Secondly, I have recent evidence. *The Guardian* of 30 November 1998 carried the headline, "Brothers die in separate falls from road bridge." The article states:

"A young man plunged to his death from a motorway bridge yesterday just feet from where his brother slipped and died in a similar accident eight weeks ago. Andrew McKay, aged 21, was sitting on the handrail contemplating his brother when he appeared to overbalance, said relatives. He died from head injuries sustained in the 33 ft fall on to the M8, yards from his home in Riddrie, Glasgow. Strathclyde police said there were no suspicious circumstances and that it was a tragic, bizarre coincidence. On October 3 David McKay, aged 17, slipped while hanging over the bridge railings to impress his new girl friend."

The article quotes the boys' father as calling for motorway bridges to be made safer. He said:

"The railings should be higher so it's harder for kids to climb up on them".

So Minister, there is evidence of two recent deaths that were put down to the national standard.

I have more compelling evidence. Paul Watters, head of roads and transport policy for the Automobile Association has written to me about objects thrown from bridge parapets. He writes:

"incidents of this type, whilst fortunately still rare, are increasing.

We are aware of the incident on 1 February 1999 on the M23 at Pease Pottage when a large lump of wood struck a car and injured the driver."

I believe that the lump went right through the windscreen and through the child seat like a stake. Fortunately, a child was not in the seat. Mr. Watters continues:

"There was a case on the M3 at Odiham Hampshire about 18 months ago when a male was gravely injured after concrete was thrown on to his car. There have also been incidents in the North—a woman suffered eye injuries just before Christmas on a northern motorway. I also recall someone throwing themselves from a bridge and subsequently going through the windscreen of a vehicle on the M3 near Eastleigh last year. Whilst these atrocious acts are isolated, random and rare we want to know the extent of the problem, and what can be done. It would certainly be reassuring to hear that the Highways Agency will agree to providing extra barrier (height) protection at bridges which are considered more at risk than others e. g. close to large housing estates or where there is a lot of late hour pedestrian traffic—this needs to be provided to deter trouble, rather than after it has occurred."

The hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) has communicated to me that some concrete from the underside of the B5385 bridge fell on to the road on the evening of 8 December. I understand from him that there are bridges with a similar problem on the M1 and the M45. I hope that that point will be taken seriously by the Government, and acted on.

[Mr. Cohen]

The Minister told me that she would consider any

"exceptional safety case for higher parapets".

The AA makes that case, but more generally—not on an individual bridge basis, which would result in relatively few departing from the national standard. That national standard needs to be reviewed and changed. The Minister also wrote to me saying,

"There have been incidents of people committing suicide by leaping from a bridge but increasing the height of the parapets is no deterrent to such acts . . . increasing the height of parapets is unlikely to deter anyone intent on vandalism."

I hope that she will not repeat that line, which was given to her by officials, as most people would regard it as incredible. Low parapets make activity easy for those with such intent. Higher parapets make it difficult.

Some would argue that cost is a reason, but I suspect that the building of lower parapets was motivated by aesthetics. If so, it shows the stupidity of transport officials in thinking that one policy applies to all bridges. It is just not good enough. If the consideration of aesthetics is to be a factor—I do not object to that—higher ornamental railings and mesh should be used. The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is living in a "Dixon of Dock Green" dream world on this matter. Public safety must be the paramount priority.

I have raised in the House the issue of corporate neglect. Now I have raised this matter in the House. If nothing is done, any future accident will involve an element of corporate culpability. The corporation in this case will be the DETR. I say to the Minister: "Do not be neglectful. Raise the height. Raise the standard."

7.38 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Glenda Jackson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) on securing this debate which, as he pointed out, is of particular importance to himself and his constituents. Grateful though I am for the compliment paid to my constituency by one of his constituents, and as is the lot for most hon. Members, it is highly unlikely that any constituent would regard the Hampstead and Highgate environment as perfect.

"The Design of Highway Bridge Parapets"—departmental standard BD52/93, to which my hon. Friend referred—replaced and updated standards that were first issued in January 1967. That standard sets out how a bridge parapet should be built, not only to provide security for pedestrians, but to contain and redirect safely vehicles that have gone out of control. Parapets are generally designed to provide what is known as normal containment, which means that they are required to have the capability to contain and safely redirect a 1.5 tonne car if it should hit a parapet at an angle of 20 degrees, when travelling at 70 mph.

This level of containment has been the design requirement since standards were first developed. It was not until August 1972 that test procedures were sufficiently advanced to be included in the standard. Since then, full-scale vehicle impact testing has been a mandatory requirement.

In 1982 a parapet was introduced to provide a higher standard of containment. It is designed to contain and safely redirect a 30 tonne vehicle travelling at 40 mph if it should hit the parapet at an angle of 20 degrees. That was developed in response to a requirement to provide increased strength against impact by heavier vehicles at high risk locations, where vehicles going through a parapet could have a disastrous effect on life and property. Although its principal use has been where roads cross high-speed railways, there have been instances where it has been provided to give protection, for instance, to factories using potentially dangerous materials in their manufacturing processes.

As my hon. Friend pointed out, the minimum parapet height—3 ft 3 in—has remained constant since 1967, although the dimensions have been metricated and rounded to the nearest sensible measurement. My hon. Friend also referred to the difference in bridges that cross railways. Railway authorities have always required the provision of higher parapets where roads cross the railway. These are set at heights of 4 ft on bridges from which the public are excluded, and 5 ft elsewhere. These dimensions also have been metricated and rounded to the nearest sensible measurement.

There are no records held centrally in the Highways Agency to suggest that those dimensions are inadequate to restrain pedestrians safely. Put simply—I trust that my hon. Friend will not regard this as my simply peddling the usual line—there is no evidence of pedestrians accidentally falling over parapets, although records do exist detailing cases where the judgment was that the deceased most probably committed suicide.

My hon. Friend mentioned a particularly tragic incident in Scotland where, in two separate incidents, two brothers died through falling from a similar bridge on the M8. I understand that the evidence is that the first death resulted from the young man climbing along the outside of the bridge. In the second incident, the young man overbalanced while walking on the handrail. The strong suspicion, I understand, is that that was suicide brought about by the remorse over the loss of his younger brother. Regrettably, despite the arguments that my hon. Friend advanced for the restraining element of height, there is no adequate way of preventing a person from taking his own life if that is the intention.

However, in particular high-risk locations, such as sites adjacent to psychiatric hospitals, higher parapets have been provided in an attempt to provide increased security. It must be emphasised that this is only a partial solution; it is almost impossible to prevent such incidents.

My hon. Friend referred to differential heights where horses are ridden across bridges. On bridges where cyclists and horse riders are required to ride immediately adjacent to bridge parapets, higher parapets are provided. As I am sure my hon. Friend will understand, in both of these instances the rider is at a higher level than a pedestrian would be.

On footbridges and road bridges where there is provision for people to walk, parapets are provided with close mesh sheeting on the traffic, or inner, face. The purpose of this is to increase the difficulty and so reduce the temptation, particularly to children, to climb onto the parapet. My hon. Friend spoke of his particular concerns for children's safety. In addition, railway bridges have the first 2 m of the outer face sheeted. The intention is again

to remove foot-holds and to prevent people from gaining access along the outer face of the parapet, where they would become a danger to themselves and a hazard to those using the tracks below.

There is a continuing problem of missiles being aimed at traffic from bridges. My hon. Friend referred to incidents in his constituency. However, that remains at a low level and, fortunately, does not seem to be increasing. The seemingly obvious solution to this problem is to increase the height of parapets, and provide full height panelling to obscure the view of approaching traffic, but that does little for a visually pleasing environment and high solid parapets are perceived as ugly and threatening by pedestrians. That solution is, therefore, considered only at sites where there is a history of such problems. I am pleased to say that repeat offences of this nature are rare, but that of itself makes it difficult to target resources.

Increasing the heights of parapets within usually acceptable limits has also failed to provide a complete solution, and we have reports from Railtrack which suggest that problems still exist with parapets 1.8 m high.

On trunk roads the strategy is, therefore, to deter incidents of vandalism by increased police patrols and the use of closed circuit television cameras. For instance, following a number of incidents of vandalism on the M60, we have been co-operating with the Greater Manchester police to review security, including the height of the parapets, on footbridges over the motorway. There is limited use of cameras at the moment, but the situation is kept under continuous review, and there may be potential to increase the application in the future if it proves to be effective. The use of CCTV on local roads is a matter for the local highway authority.

The parapets on the majority of footbridges across the A12 Hackney Wick to M11 link road are similar to the many thousands on bridges across trunk roads in this country. The exceptions are where the bridges cross both the link road and the London Underground Central line. The design of those footbridges was a requirement of the London Underground authority, and there was consultation with the local authority. Those bridges are of high quality and provide a balance between aesthetics and fitness for purpose. They have clear plastic sides to prevent objects being thrown or dropped on to the Central line and to act as a deterrent to muggers. The drawback to that is that, while people on the bridges are visible to the outside world, people using the bridges may at present be able to look into adjacent properties. To overcome that, and to increase privacy, opaque panels are being provided at the ends of the bridges with screen planting adjacent to the properties.

In the context of personal safety the Highways Agency is also considering the visual aspects of bridge parapets, including the problem of how to deal with historic bridges, and a report is expected in the autumn of 2000. That will take on board the interests of road users and other organisations in the general appearance of bridges, and will examine the potential conflict that can arise when measures are introduced to deal with aspects of vandalism.

Mr. Cohen: I am interested in what my hon. Friend says, which is important. But she said that the parapet size in my constituency is the same as that of thousands of bridges throughout Britain. Does the national standard take no account of well-populated urban areas?

Ms Glenda Jackson: I am sure that my hon. Friend is not claiming that his is the only constituency in a well-populated urban area. Well-populated urban areas occur throughout the country.

The Highways Agency has been active, along with other interested parties, in the production of British Standard 6779—"Highway Parapets for Bridges and Other Structures". The contents of that are essentially a restatement of the requirements currently contained in departmental standards, with additions and amendments to reflect the latest research findings. The Highways Agency will be adopting all the parts of this document. The Highways Agency has also contributed to the production of the harmonised European Standard EN 1317, and it is pleasing to note that the document reflects the United Kingdom's requirements.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing the issue to the attention of the House. He has raised the matter through correspondence and the media, and I know that he is motivated by a desire to protect the safety of his constituents. I hope that, given the reasons that I have outlined, he is content that the pedestrians of Leyton and Wanstead are as safe as the thousands of other people in this country who use bridges every day. However, if he has not been satisfied by what I have said this evening, I have little doubt that he will contact me again, and I shall, of course, always listen to what he has to say.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at ten minutes to Eight o'clock.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 25 January 1999

DEFENCE

Gulf War Veterans

10. **Mr. Quinn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much the Government are spending on research into the illnesses of Gulf war veterans. [65533]

Mr. Doug Henderson: As I told the House earlier today, *Official Report*, column 7, my Department has a programme of research into Gulf Veterans' illnesses covering four main areas. So far, about £1.9m has been spent on these studies and we estimate that they will cost a further £4m to complete.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what research he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated concerning the health effects on service personnel of depleted uranium shells used in the Gulf War. [64225]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Ministry of Defence is currently funding four research programmes into different aspects of Gulf veterans' illnesses. However, none of these programmes is specifically aimed at investigating the relationship between possible exposure to depleted uranium (DU) and the illnesses being experienced by some Gulf veterans. The MOD has previously published the Defence Radiological Protection Service's (now the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency's Radiation Protection Service) 1993 assessment of the radiological and chemical hazards of DU. The MOD continues to monitor published research which may be relevant to the issue of Gulf veterans' illnesses, including any material concerning DU.

I have asked my Department to collate the information which it possesses concerning mechanisms which would be used to test for the presence of uranium in the human body. I will publish this work shortly.

The MOD is well aware that a link has been suggested between exposure to DU and Gulf veterans' illnesses. However, this is only one of a number of factors which have been suggested as causes of Gulf veterans' illnesses and, pending further medical and scientific evidence, my Department is keeping an open mind on this issue.

Armed Forces (Education and Training)

11. **Mrs. Gilroy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps the Government are taking to increase education and training provision in the armed forces. [65534]

28. **Mr. Shaw:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps the Government are taking to increase education and training opportunities within the armed forces. [65551]

Mr. Doug Henderson: We already provide a wide range of education and training opportunities for Armed Forces personnel. Our 'Learning Forces' initiative extends from recruitment to resettlement and beyond. It is a major contribution to the Government's commitment to improving educational opportunities and to ensuring that the qualifications Service personnel receive are fully recognised and transferable when they return to civilian life.

Queen's Regulations

12. **Mr. Keith Simpson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what proposals he has to amend Queen's Regulations. [65535]

Mr. Doug Henderson: As with primary legislation, Queen's Regulations are constantly kept under review and amended when necessary, either as a result of changes to primary legislation, departmental policy, or for administrative reasons.

Defence Medical Services

13. **Laura Moffatt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much the Government plan to spend over the next four years on the Defence Medical Services. [65536]

18. **Mr. Rapson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much the Government plan to spend over the next four years on the Defence Medical Services. [65541]

Mr. George Robertson: This Government are fully committed to improving the present state of the Defence Medical Services. To this end, as I announced recently, an additional £140 million pounds is being put into the Defence Medical Services as a result of the Strategic Defence Review. This sum is spread over the current financial year and the next three years to March 2002. We plan to maintain increased expenditure in subsequent years.

Shoeburyness

14. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made in the disposal of the MOD sites in Shoeburyness; and if he will make a statement. [65537]

Mr. Spellar: Horseshoe Barracks and Old Ranges, including Gunners Park at Shoeburyness have been declared surplus to MOD's requirements and are now being prepared for disposal. A draft Planning Brief, which was subject to a public consultation exercise was approved by the Borough Council's Planning and Transportation Committee on 19 January and will be placed before the full Council on 25 February. Marketing of the site will begin once the Council have approved the brief. DERA are currently examining possible development opportunities at the New Ranges. Should any part of the New Ranges become surplus to MOD requirement, the Borough Council has suggested that it be the subject of a separate Planning Brief.

Cadets (Expenditure)

15. **Mr. Miller:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the Government's current expenditure plans in relation to cadets. [65538]

19. **Mr. Andy King:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the Government's expenditure plans in relation to cadets. [65542]

Mr. Doug Henderson: We are fully committed to supporting the Cadet Forces. Our planned expenditure in the current financial year totals some £58 million. As a further indication of its commitment, the Government previously announced an increase in cadet forces' expenditure of £3 million over the next four years. This is in addition to up to £12 million which will be made available in order to ensure that those cadet units affected by Reserve Forces' Restructuring announced within the Strategic Defence Review will be provided with alternative accommodation.

Operation Desert Fox

16. **Mr. Martin Bell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the effectiveness of Operation Desert Fox. [65539]

Mr. George Robertson: Operation Desert Fox was a success. It met our military objectives. We assess that 87 per cent. of targets were damaged or destroyed and that the ability of Saddam Hussein to make or use chemical and biological weapons or otherwise threaten his neighbours has been set back significantly. I have sent a full report on the effects of Operation Desert Fox to all Members and a copy has been placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his estimate of the number of civilian casualties caused by the bombing of Iraq during December 1998. [65480]

Mr. George Robertson: The risk of civilian casualties was a major consideration in selecting targets during Operation Desert Fox and only precision guided weapons were used where there was any risk of collateral damage. Indeed, Operation Desert Fox was the most accurate bombing campaign in which we have ever been involved. Whilst the Iraqi regime have prevented UN humanitarian workers from independently viewing all but a carefully selected few of the sites hit, we are confident that civilian casualties were minimal.

Sir Peter Emery: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the selection of targets during the recent bombing of Iraq was influenced by reports received from any member of UNSCOM. [66001]

Mr. George Robertson *[holding answer 20 January 1999]:* I do not discuss detailed operational issues and withhold such information under category 1a (National Security and Defence) of the Code of Conduct. Both the UK and US Governments have made it clear, however, that all information exchanges between themselves and UNSCOM have been strictly in pursuit of UNSCOM's mandate to dismantle Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction capability. Target selection for Operation Desert Fox was a very thorough and detailed process involving information from a wide variety of sources.

Nuclear Weapons (Russian Federation)

17. **Mr. Beard:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on measures to stockpile tactical nuclear weapons in the Russian Federation and to prevent radioactive substances of military origin being traded. [65540]

Mr. George Robertson: Russia continues to maintain physical security arrangements at its nuclear weapon storage sites. Matters relating to tactical nuclear weapons are a subject of discussion in the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council. We and Allies continue to seek to develop the dialogue in this area. International efforts to prevent illicit trafficking in nuclear materials are also co-ordinated through the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Kosovo

20. **Mr. Burden:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the security situation in Kosovo. [65543]

27. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the current security situation in Kosovo. [65550]

Mr. George Robertson: I refer my hon. Friends to the answer I gave earlier today to my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, South (Mr. Sutcliffe), *Official Report*, column 11.

Armed Forces (Overstretch)

21. **Mr. McWilliam:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps the Government are taking to reduce overstretch in the armed forces. [65544]

24. **Mr. Borrow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps the Government are taking to reduce overstretch in the armed forces. [65547]

Mr. Doug Henderson: We are firmly committed to addressing overstretch in the armed forces. We are taking a number of steps to increase recruitment to the armed forces which continues to improve for all three Services. The Army, in particular, anticipates meeting its challenging target for soldier recruitment this year, for the first time since 1991.

We are also making efforts to improve retention in the armed forces. Our new "Policy for the People" is designed to make the services a more attractive career, both for those already serving and for those considering joining. The Policy includes significant educational and training opportunities for service personnel, and improvements to Service life, for the forces themselves and their families.

In addition, the outcome of the Strategic Defence Review should reduce overstretch in the Services by improving the flexibility and operational effectiveness of the armed forces through better assignment of resources to commitments.

Global Nuclear Disarmament

22. **Mr. Savidge:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps the Government are taking to promote global nuclear disarmament. [65545]

Mr. George Robertson: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave earlier to my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King), *Official Report*, column 14.

Sierra Leone

23. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the involvement of Her Majesty's Government's armed forces in the current situation in Sierra Leone. [65546]

Mr. George Robertson: HMS Norfolk was sent to Sierra Leone to demonstrate the UK's commitment to promoting peace and stability and to support our diplomatic and humanitarian efforts there. The ship is liaising with the Government of Sierra Leone and the Military Observer Group of the Economic Community of West African States forces. The ship's helicopter has already delivered some much-needed medical supplies provided by the UK Government to the devastated main hospital in Freetown. There are no plans for UK armed forces to become involved in the military conflict in support of the Government of Sierra Leone and the Military Observer Group of the Economic Community of West African States.

It is planned that the Royal Fleet Auxiliary tanker Oakleaf will re-supply HMS Norfolk on 26 January. We are using Oakleaf's spare container capacity to transport further humanitarian aid to Freetown provided by the UK Government.

Seven UK military personnel were deployed in Sierra Leone with the UN monitoring mission. All but one have now been withdrawn by the UN as part of a reduction in their mission.

Trident

25. **Mr. Boswell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on progress in the construction of the fourth Trident submarine. [65548]

Mr. George Robertson: HMS Vengeance, the fourth Trident submarine, was launched in September last year. Contractors Sea Trials are due to start in the Spring.

32. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the percentage reduction in Trident warhead totals typically deployed on each submarine since 1 May 1997. [65555]

Mr. George Robertson: As I said in my answer to the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) on 16 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *237*, Trident submarines had typically deployed on deterrent patrol with 60 warheads. One outcome of the Strategic Defence Review was our decision that each Trident submarine will carry a reduced load of 48 warheads. This is a 20 per cent. reduction in warheads carried.

Single Soldiers' Accommodation

26. **Mr. Blunt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to improve single soldiers' accommodation. [65549]

Mr. Spellar: We have a firm commitment to continue to improve the standard of accommodation for all soldiers. Work is currently underway on a programme of major capital works to deliver these improvements.

Iraq

29. **Mr. Campbell-Savours:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he next intends to visit the Gulf states to discuss Iraq. [65552]

Mr. George Robertson: I hope to visit a number of Gulf states in the coming weeks to discuss a wide range of issues of mutual interest, including Iraq.

Chile (Military Equipment Orders)

30. **Miss Kirkbride:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his estimate of the cost to the United Kingdom of the recent cancellation of military equipment orders by the Government of Chile. [65553]

Mr. Spellar: I am not aware of the recent cancellation of any defence equipment orders from the UK by the Government of Chile.

43 (Wessex) Brigade

31. **Mr. Bradshaw:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations he has received on proposals to move the headquarters of 43 (Wessex) Brigade from Exeter to Bulford; and if he will make a statement. [65554]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I have received a number of representations about our plans for Headquarters 43 (Wessex) Brigade, including from my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery), and the hon. Members for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls), for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) and for Torbay (Mr. Sanders), and from Devon County Council.

Defence Diversification Agency

33. **Mr. Watts:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on progress towards establishing a defence diversification agency. [65556]

Mr. Spellar: As foreshadowed in our White Paper ("Defence Diversification: Getting the most of defence technology", Cm 4088 published November 1998), the Defence Diversification Agency began operating last month.

Territorial Army

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what assessment his Department made of the possibility of moving a TA battalion HQ from south to north Wales during its consideration of the restructuring of the TA; and what estimate it made of the cost; [65015]

(2) what assessment he has made of the benefits of transferring a battalion headquarters from south Wales to north Wales. [63812]

Mr. Doug Henderson: There are at present two Infantry battalion Headquarters in Wales, one in the North of the principality and the other in the South. The amalgamation of TA infantry units in Wales into one battalion will require only one of these headquarters in the future, necessitating a choice to be made between the two for the new TA Infantry battalion Headquarters. Taking into account the recommendation of the TAVRA, we decided that the Infantry battalion Headquarters should

be based in Cardiff. The cost of basing the battalion Headquarters in either of the two locations was taken into account as part of the considerations.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has *(a)* to improve recruitment of officers in the north Wales TA and *(b)* to fill the existing officer vacancies in the north Wales TA. [65021]

Mr. Doug Henderson: We plan to launch a new national recruit marketing campaign, beginning in February 1999, as part of the launch of the new TA structure. In addition, we will encourage the transfer of suitable TA volunteers by the creation of a nationwide TA 'Job Shop', and by making arrangements to identify those who wish to take up these opportunities and to match individuals to posts where possible.

Northern Ireland (Observation Structures)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the location of the structures other than surveillance towers that are maintained by the security forces in Northern Ireland for a variety of observation purposes referred to in his answer of 3 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *443–44*. [65997]

Mr. George Robertson *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* All Security Force bases in Northern Ireland have an observation function to some degree or other, for example, guard towers to maintain local security. There are currently 43 bases used by the British Army, including the Royal Irish Regiment, in Northern Ireland which are occupied by a platoon or more of troops. These include bases which are exclusively military or shared with the RUC and are listed by Brigade, as follows:

3rd Infantry Brigade

Bessbrook
RUC Crossmaglen
RUC Forkhill
RUC Newtownhamilton
Drumadd Barracks
RUC Keady
RUC Middletown
Mahon Barracks
Abercorn Barracks and Ballykinler Training Centre
Rathfriland
Aughnacloy
Dungannon
Cookstown

8th Infantry Brigade

RUC Lisnaskea
Clogher
Clooney Base
Ebrington Barracks
Fort George
Magherafelt
Shackleton Barracks
Lisanelly Barracks
St. Lucia Barracks
Grosvenor Barracks
Magilligan Training Centre
St. Patrick's Barracks
RUC Strabane
Coleraine (Laurel Hill House)

39th Infantry Brigade

RUC Girdwood Park
RUC Ladas Drive
RUC Grosvenor Road
Moscow Camp and Airport Jetty
Musgrave Park Hospital
Duke of Connaught Unit
Malone Road
RUC Woodbourne
Carrickfergus
Massereene Barracks
Steeple Barracks
Thiepval Barracks
Kinnegar
Palace Barracks
Long Kesh
Aldergrove.

Notes:

1. At the time of my previous answer of 3 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *445*, there were 44 bases occupied by a platoon or more of troops. Fort Whiterock within 39 InfBde was decommissioned on 11 December 1998 and dismantling of the base is under way.

2. The list does not include RUC stations which have a token military presence, permanent vehicle check point (PVCPs) or patrol bases which were previously PVCPs.

Project Horizon

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what alternative systems to Project Horizon are available to the Royal Navy; [66749]

(2) what representations he has received from European partners concerning Project Horizon; [66755]

(3) what departmental funds have been spent to date on Project Horizon; [66750]

(4) what plans he has for his Department's future participation in Project Horizon. [66754]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 21 January 1999]:* The Common New Generation Frigate, CNGF, is a French/Italian/UK collaborative project, comprising of two programmes, the Horizon warship and the Principal Anti-Air Missile System—PAAMS. We have achieved satisfactory progress on PAAMS with our partners, but we require urgent and similar progress on the Horizon warship. We are looking to a successful outcome to the current difficulties; an affordable, effective warship and the establishment of a robust industrial structure to manage the development and build of the warship and its systems. The National Armament Directors met on 14 January 1999 to discuss, among other things, progress on CNGF. No final decisions have been taken, and industry has been asked to provide definitive responses on the areas of concern. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence intends to meet his French and Italian counterparts shortly to discuss these issues further. Clearly, if rapid progress on these matters is not forthcoming, we would need to consider the option of alternative strategies, including a national warship, to

ensure that the Royal Navy's requirement is fulfilled. The departmental spend on the Horizon programme to the 31 December 1998 was £75 million. The majority of this spend was on feasibility and assessment Studies.

Sudan

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what response he has sent to the request of the Government of the Sudan that a British inspection team be sent to the Al Shifa factory in Khartoum. [67622]

Mr. George Robertson: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Fatchett), on 30 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *96*, to the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan).

REME (Chorley)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the assessments which are required to establish a full costing of the move of HQ 101 Battalion REME from Chorley to Queensferry which have not yet been prepared. [65019]

Mr. Doug Henderson: A full costing of the move will depend on finalising what modifications are required at the Queensferry site, the cost of re-locating staff who transfer to the new location, the cost of any redundancies found to be necessary, and the cost of re-locating the HQ's equipment and vehicles. From the costings to date, it is already clear that running cost savings will arise from the co-location of HQ 101 Battalion REME at the Queensferry site.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he will place in the Library a copy of the latest version of the memorandum of understanding between the MOD and the Child Support Agency. [66063]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* I have now placed a copy of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Defence and the Child Support Agency in the Library of the House. I have not been able to do so until now as there had been a delay in the signing of the Memorandum. The delay resulted from copies of the latest version of the Memorandum, which had been signed on behalf of the Ministry of Defence and forwarded to the Child Support Agency for signature by the Agency's Chief Executive, being lost in transit.

Infra-red Technology

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if infra-red technology is listed by his Department as a key defence technology. [66663]

Mr. Spellar: Infra-red technology has a wide spectrum of applications in both defence and civil sectors. Certain elements of infra-red technology are listed as key defence technologies.

Competition

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what action he has taken to ensure that technology developed partly using his Department's funding is given the opportunity to compete for sub-systems work when private contractors are given overall technical responsibility. [66662]

Mr. Spellar: Companies involved in developing technology funded wholly, or in part, by the MOD can incorporate both technology into their competitive tenders for subsequent work, subject to the usual rules of competition and licensing.

Service Lives

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the anticipated service life of *(a)* Tornado GR4 aircraft engines, *(b)* Eurofighter aircraft airframes and *(c)* Type 42 ships. [66664]

Mr. Spellar: The anticipated service life of these respective equipments is as follows:

(a) Tornado GR4 engines—25 years.

(b) Eurofighter aircraft airframe—25 years.

(c) Type 42 destroyers—in excess of 22 years but varies for individual vessels in the class.

HMS Ark Royal

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his estimate of the cost of the future refit of HMS Ark Royal; and when he expects the refit to commence. [66700]

Mr. Spellar: The estimate of the cost of the future refit of HMS Ark Royal is commercially sensitive as we are still engaged in contract negotiations. I am, therefore, withholding the information under exemption 7 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. On current plans the refit is due to commence in May 1999.

International Military Services

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what basis International Military Services (Iran) is trading; and if he will make a statement on its activities. [66984]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 21 January 1999]:* I understand that IMS Iran Ltd. ceased trading in 1991.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what basis International Military Services Ltd. is trading; and if he will make a statement on its activities. [66998]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 21 January 1999]:* International Military Services Ltd. ceased trading in July 1991, and only remains in being until its outstanding obligations are discharged.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what basis International Military Services (Saudi Arabia) is trading; and if he will make a statement on its activities. [66985]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 21 January 1999]:* I understand that IMS Saudi Arabia Ltd. ceased trading as at 1 January 1985.

Defence Estate

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what arrangements exist for publicising the public access arrangements to the defence estate; and what plans he has to publish the arrangements on the internet. [67003]

Mr. Spellar: Public access to the Defence Estate is promoted via the booklet "Walks on MOD Lands", which is issued on request free of charge. There are also leaflets detailing local access arrangements, available from a number of establishments. Whereas access has to be restricted at certain times because of live firing for example, details of the closures are published in the local press and in some areas, broadcast on the local radio. The Dartmoor training area also has a manned telephone line to answer queries, as do some other training areas. It is intended to publish information about access to the Defence estate on the Internet, although no date has yet been set.

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what income was received by the MoD estate from *(a)* agricultural lettings, *(b)* sporting rights and *(c)* commercial lettings in each year since 1994–95. [67004]

Mr. Spellar: The information requested is shown in the table:

£

	(a) Agricultural lettings	*(b) Sporting rights*	*(c) Commercial lettings*
1994–95	3,787,972	75,974	5,307,870
1995–96	4,011,546	44,276	5,693,040
1996–97	3,794,769	51,973	5,897,999
1997–98	3,674,562	58,762	9,036,551
1998–99	3,802,096	43,521	7,644,033

Notes:
1. The figures shown for 1994–95 and 1995–96 are approximate totals as a dedicated computerised system was not set up until 1996.
2. The figures for 1998–99 have been estimated up until the end of the financial year.

Departmental Activities (Environmental Impact)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps he is taking to reduce the environmental impact of his Department's activities. [65522]

Mr. Spellar: An Environmental Management Systems (EMS) Working Group has been established to develop an MOD-wide EMS based on ISO 14001. The intention is to use the EMS as a vehicle to enable my Department to meet its Greening Government commitment and to contribute to the Government's sustainable development objectives.

UN Weapons Inspectors

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* members of the staff of his Department and *(b)* persons otherwise attached to his Department have served with the UN weapons inspectors in Iraq since 1991. [67019]

Mr. George Robertson: The answers are as follows:

(a) Approximately 220 MOD personnel have served with UNSCOM since 1991. More precise figures are not available without incurring disproportionate cost.

(b) None.

Royal Navy (Aircraft Carriers)

Mr. Bradshaw: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his plans to develop new aircraft carriers for the Royal Navy. [67669]

Mr. George Robertson: The Strategic Defence Review set out our plans to replace our existing aircraft carriers from 2012 with two larger new-generation carriers, each capable of operating up to 50 aircraft, fixed wing and helicopters. The Invitation To Tender for the initial assessment phase of the CVF project has been released to industry today.

The new carriers will be acquired through SMART procurement methods, beginning with an assessment phase. This will have two main stages: first, the examination of a wide variety of carrier design options, which will also inform our choice of Future Carrier Borne Aircraft; and, secondly, detailed work to determine the carriers' design parameters and to reduce technological risk. The assessment phase is expected to be completed in 2003, paving the way for the full development and construction of the two new aircraft carriers.

An Integrated Project Team, IPT, of MOD and industry personnel will manage the procurement. As part of this new approach, the IPT's leader's post will be filled by open competition.

RAF Manston

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what consultations his Department conducted with the Civil Aviation Authority prior to stating in its sales literature for RAF Manston the end of March as a completion date. [67366]

Mr. Spellar: In accordance with CAA licensing procedures, no formal consultation could take place prior to the appointment of a licensee for the Airfield. This could only follow the exchange of a conditional contract. However, some informal discussions did take place on matters of detail.

Highly Enriched Uranium Production

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if United Kingdom production levels of highly enriched uranium are adequate to meet current demand. [65526]

Mr. George Robertson: The United Kingdom has not produced highly enriched uranium, HEU, for defence purposes since 1962. As stated in Supporting Essay 5 to the Strategic Defence Review, the HEU held by the Ministry of Defence is required to meet current defence requirements. Production for civil purposes is a matter for the Department of Trade and Industry.

Joint Helicopter Command

Mr. Quinn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the formation of the Joint Helicopter Command proposed in the Strategic Defence Review. [67855]

Mr. George Robertson: In July 1998, following the Strategic Defence Review, I announced our intention to create a Joint Helicopter Command to pool the expertise of the three Services in the operation of Battlefield helicopter fleets and so enhance their fighting effectiveness.

I have now accepted the recommendation of the Joint Helicopter Command Study Team that the Command be based at the Army's Land Command headquarters at Wilton, Wiltshire. The headquarters will form on 1 October this year and will be fully operational by 1 April 2000.

The work of the Study Team has also confirmed that the Joint Helicopter Command should bring together, under a single joint organisation, the Royal Navy's Commando helicopters, all operational Army Air Corps helicopters, including the whole of 16 Air Assault Brigade which in future will include the Attack Helicopter, and the RAF's Support Helicopters. Its role will be to direct the training, planning and resourcing of these forces across the range of defence missions and tasks, thereby making most effective use of the available assets. The Command will draw on the best practices from each of the Services, while retaining and building upon individual Service identity and ethos. Single Service units will continue to be commanded and manned by personnel from that Service, and a mix of Navy, Army, Air Force and Civil Service personnel will man the Headquarters.

Senator Pinochet

Mr. Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what contact relating to the most recent visit to Britain of Senator Pinochet his Department had with *(a)* the Chilean Military Attaché and *(b)* others in the Chilean Embassy; and what was the nature and outcome of such discussions. [67281]

Mr. George Robertson: I am not aware of any formal contact between the Ministry of Defence and the Chilean Embassy about the arrangements for Senator Pinochet's visit to the UK in October last year. Discussions about the UK's defence relations with Chile have continued with the Chilean Military Attaché and others in the Chilean Embassy since Senator Pinochet's arrest. Inevitably, issues arising from Senator Pinochet's arrest have been mentioned from time to time in the margins of these discussions.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Select Committee Chairmen

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Council if she will introduce salaries for Select Committee Chairmen. [66813]

Mrs. Beckett: I have no plans to do so.

Register of Members' Interests

Mr. Winnick: To ask the President of the Council if she will recommend changes to the Register of Members' Interest to require all pecuniary outside interests to be listed and outside earnings to be shown in appropriate bands. [67371]

Mrs. Beckett: The Neill Committee on Standards in Public Life announced on 17 December 1998 that it would review the recommendations of its first report (Cm. 2850) which dealt with, among other things, the outside interests of MPs and the register of interests. I have no plans to propose changes to the rules on registration of interests before the Neill Committee reports, but Members and others can make suggestions direct to the Neill Committee.

Regional Development Agencies

Mr. Curry: To ask the President of the Council what proposals she has for parliamentary scrutiny of the Regional Development Agencies. [66188]

Mrs. Beckett: Regional Development Agencies are non-departmental public bodies and Ministers will be accountable to Parliament for their activities in the usual way.

The Regional Development Agencies Act 1998 requires the accounts of each RDA to be audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General. Copies of the accounts and the Comptroller and Auditor General's report on them will be sent to the Secretary of State for Environment, Transport and the Regions who will lay them before each House of Parliament. The Comptroller and Auditor General also has powers to carry out value for money studies on the RDAs.

RDAs are also required to submit their annual reports to the Secretary of State for Environment, Transport and the Regions who will lay copies before each House of Parliament.

Each RDA will have an Accounting Officer, usually the Chief Executive, who will be accountable to Parliament through the Public Accounts Committee for the expenditure of public money.

RDAs are also open to scrutiny by the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Select Committee. They have just begun their second inquiry into RDAs.

I also recently announced that I will be submitting a memorandum to the Modernisation Committee inviting them to examine the possibility of reviving and adapting the Standing Committee on regional affairs. Matters relating to RDAs would certainly be within the remit of such a Committee.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Jack: To ask the President of the Council what is her current estimate of the total cost to public sector bodies of preparing to avoid millennium bug problems. [67387]

Mrs. Beckett: I do not believe that it is possible or worthwhile to attempt to establish the true cost of the Year 2000 preparations for the public sector as a whole given that each organisation assesses its costs in different ways. Typically departments' plans include the additional costs posed by the bug such as contractors, and new systems. They do not tend to include in house resources or routine system up-grades. I do publish the cost estimates for central Government and key elements of the public sector as part of the quarterly reports to Parliament. The total cost for central Government is estimated at £400 million, and will be found from within existing budgets. This figure has remained fairly stable over the last year.

Mr. Jack: To ask the President of the Council if she will require public bodies to publish details of the contingency plans which they are developing to deal with the consequences of the millennium bug. [67386]

Mrs. Beckett: I have asked all Departments and agencies to have initial contingency plans in place by the end of this month. I will be consulting colleagues about how much of the detail of the plans could sensibly be put into the public domain.

TREASURY

Ultra Low Sulphur Petrol

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to encourage the use of ultra low sulphur petrol. [66449]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 20 January 1999]:* The Chancellor is aware of forthcoming changes in standards for fuel quality, including the timescale for achievement of these standards. These issues will be carefully considered in the run up to the Budget.

Salaries (Euro)

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make arrangements for civil servants to have the option of receiving their salaries in euros. [66508]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* There are no plans to offer civil service staff the option of receiving salaries in euro while the United Kingdom is outside the single currency zone.

However, Departments with staff posted in eurozone countries have taken steps to enable them to draw their entitlements in euro when arrangements in the host country make that appropriate.

Oil Tax Revenues

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the UK oil tax revenues from 1999–2000 onwards assuming an oil price of 10 US dollars per barrel; and if he will make a statement. [65701]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* Reliable estimates cannot easily be made. They would require detailed assumptions on how an oil price of $10 per barrel would affect the future levels of production and expenditure. A forecast of £1.3 billion for 1999–2000 was published in the Pre-Budget Report in November last year based on the oil price being flat at about $13 per barrel (in real terms).

Government Debt (Yield Differential)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what measures he has put in place to achieve his policy of reducing the differential between yields on German and British long-term Government debt; what bench mark maturity and yield differential he is using for this target; and if he will make a statement. [65677]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* The Government introduced their new monetary policy framework, with Bank of England independence, to ensure that their commitment to price stability is delivered in practice. Maintaining low inflation will help reduce the differential between yields on German and British long-term debt. Since the Government came into office, the differential has fallen by 1.1 percentage points.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when his Department will publish the final version of PFI Technical Note 1 on How to Account for PFI transactions. [65501]

Mr. Milburn *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* Shortly.

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what addition there would be to Government borrowing if all approved capital developments provided through PFI were to be financed by traditional Government borrowing. [66507]

Mr. Milburn: Figures for the total value of private sector investment in the period covered by the Comprehensive Spending Review resulting from PFI projects were given in the answer by the then Paymaster General to my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Mr. Caplin) on 19 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *846–47*.

Air Passenger Duty

Sir Peter Emery: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the monthly revenue raised by air passenger duty since its inception. [66079]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* Information in the form requested can be found in the Government Statistical Service publication "Financial Statistics". Table 2.1D "Customs and Excise taxes" shows monthly figures for receipts from Air Passenger Duty.

Air Passenger Duty was introduced on 1 November 1994. However as duty is required to be paid in the month after that in which the flight took place, the first duty was received in December 1994.

Sir Peter Emery: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the annual cost for collecting air passenger duty *(a)* to the Treasury and *(b)* to individual airlines. [66078]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The annual cost to the Treasury of collecting Air Passenger Duty is approximately £400,000. The annual cost to individual airlines will vary depending on the business practices of each airline.

UK Abatement

Mr. Whittingdale: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much money was received as a result of the United Kingdom's abatement in each year since it was established under the Fontainebleau agreement. [66121]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The cash amounts made available to the United Kingdom due to its abatement, together with an estimate for this financial year, are as follows:

£ million

Year	*Amount*
1985–86	823
1986–87	1,343
1987–88	1,137
1988–89	1,600
1989–90	1,317
1990–91	1,838
1991–92	2,428
1992–93	1,993
1993–94	2,350
1994–95	1,648
1995–96	1,576
1996–97	2,418
1997–98	1,563
1998–99 (estimate)	2,726
Total	24,762

Fraud (EU)

Mr. Whittingdale: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what action was agreed under the last British presidency of the EU to combat fraud. [66124]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The Government made the fight against fraud one of the priorities of the UK Presidency of the EU, ensuring that it was kept high on the agenda. Priority was given to work on the recommendations of the High-Level Group on Organised Crime. Progress was reported to the Cardiff European Council, including conclusion of the pre-accession pact on organised crime with applicant countries, establishment of a European judicial network to improve practical co-operation and improvements to the mechanism for collecting and analysing data on organised crime. Progress was made on legislation to improve the working of the transit system and preparation of the new computerised transit system, aimed at making the Community transit system less vulnerable to fraud. Work continued on the SEM2000 initiative with measures to improve financial management and fight fraud both in the Commission managed programmes and in the 82 per cent. of the EC budget which is administered by Member States. The 19 May ECOFIN Council was devoted to financial management and anti-fraud issues including considering the annual Fight against fraud report and the Commission's anti-fraud work programme for 1998–99. The Council conclusions emphasised the importance of this work.

Tax and Social Security Contributions

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will publish figures for the total tax and social security contributions from 1997–98 to 2002–03 on the basis used in Table 4.5 of the July 1997 Red Book, HC 85. [64638]

Ms Hewitt: The figures for net taxes and social security contributions as a per cent. of GDP in table B9 of the Pre-Budget Report (PBR) are on a cash basis. The corresponding figures in table 4.5 of the July 1997 Financial Statement and Budget Report (FSBR) are on an accruals basis. Moving from a cash to an accruals basis requires the addition of accruals adjustments to the cash figures. Accruals adjustments for tax receipts were forecast to be about 0.1 per cent. of GDP in 1998–99, and to remain at about this level in each of the forecast years shown in table B9 of the PBR.

Under national accounts conventions at the time of the July 1997 FSBR, a small amount of MIRAS and of life assurance premium tax reliefs were scored as public expenditure. These amounts do not significantly affect the PBR tax/GDP ratio. The Working Families Tax Credit will only be introduced in October 1999 and hence no assumptions about its treatment were made at the time of the July 1997 FSBR.

EMU

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of sterling's performance against the criteria set for membership of economic and monetary union by the European Commission; and if he will make a statement. [66162]

Ms Hewitt: In line with the Council decision of 3 May 1998, under Article 109j(4) of the Treaty, the Government accept that exchange rate stability is an important precondition for membership of the single currency. The Government are committed to ensuring a stable and competitive exchange rate for sterling over the medium term, consistent with our objective of price stability. The Government have no intention of rejoining the ERM.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list those *(a)* member states and *(b)* community bodies which (i) support and (ii) oppose Her Majesty's Government's position that UK accession to the single currency does not require prior participation in an exchange rate mechanism. [66378]

Ms Hewitt: The Government have no intention of rejoining the ERM. The Government have never believed that the Treaty provisions on membership of the ERM could be applied mechanically given the changes that have occurred since the Treaty was agreed in 1991. The Recommendation of the Commission under Article 109j(2) in March 1998 and the Decision of the Council under Article 109j(4) in May 1998 both avoided a mechanical approach to the application of the criteria, allowing for the exercise of judgment provided by the Treaty.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Ron Davies: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if, for the purposes of calculating the specific comparability of the DTI and DETR (non local government) for the Welsh block for CSR, expenditure on nationalised industries was included in the calculation; if such decision represented a change in the practice applied in 1998–99; and what his assessment is of the impact of this decision on the Welsh block; [66187]

(2) pursuant to his answer of 11 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns *20–21*, on departmental expenditure, what was the specific comparability determined by the

coverage of Welsh Office services for (i) 1997–98 and (ii) 1998–99 in each of *(a)* the DTI, *(b)* the DETR (non local government) and *(c)* the DFEE; [66185]

(3) what changes have been made in the method of calculating the comparability percentage relevant for calculating the Welsh block in each of *(a)* the DTI, *(b)* DETR (non local government) and *(c)* the DFEE for the year 1999–2000 as compared to the year 1998–99. [66186]

Mr. Milburn: The Government maintained the total allocations for the Welsh Office for 1997–98 and 1998–99 determined by the previous Government in the 1996 Public Expenditure Survey. The comparabilities applied within the 1996 Survey were the responsibility of the previous Government.

Pensions Review

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress is being made on Phase 2 of the pensions review; and if he will make a statement. [66230]

Ms Hewitt: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Ms Lawrence) on 14 January, *Official Report*, columns *283–84*.

2001 Census

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the 2001 census will include a question to enable the calculation of the number of people living outside Wales who speak Welsh. [66190]

Ms Hewitt: The Government's proposal for the 2001 Census, including the topics to be covered, will shortly be published in a White Paper.

Prostate Cancer

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many cases of prostate cancer were diagnosed in each of the last 10 years; and what are the projected numbers of new cases estimated by his Department over the next five years. [65821]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 20 January 1999]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Vernon Coaker, dated 25 January 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question on prostate cancer.

The number of new cases of prostate cancer diagnosed from 1971 to 1992 in England and Wales are given in "Cancer statistics—Registrations" (MB1 series). Estimates for 1993–1997 are given in "Estimates of newly diagnosed cases of cancer, England and Wales, 1993–1997" (Monitor MB1 98/2). Copies of these publications are available in the Library of the House. No official projections are available.

Hypothermia Fatalities

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many deaths where hypothermia was mentioned on the death certificate as the main or contributory cause of death took place in England and Wales in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1992, *(c)* 1987, *(d)* 1982 and *(e)* 1977 amongst those (i) of all ages, (ii) aged 60 to 74, (iii) aged 74 to 84 and (iv) aged over 85 years; what were the winter mortality rates for (1) the population as a whole, (2) people aged 60 to 74, (3) people aged 75 to 84 and (4) people aged 85 years and over; and what the percentage increase was in each group compared to non-winter deaths in 1997–98, 1992–93, 1987–88, 1982–83 and 1977–78. [66381]

Ms Hewitt: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Eddie O'Hara, dated 25 January 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question on how many deaths, where hypothermia was mentioned on the death certificate as the main or contributory cause of death, took place in England and Wales.

The information requested is shown in the tables below.

Deaths for selected age-groups where hypothermia was mentioned as the main or contributory cause of death in England and Wales 1977–97 [1]

Year	All ages	60–74	75–84	85+
1977	594	139	232	155
1982	645	147	224	188
1987	551	117	205	151
1992	329	57	115	117
1997	357	51	127	127

[1] Data for 1997 are based on deaths that occurred during the year, deaths for all other years are based on those registered during the year

Excess winter mortality, England and Wales 1977–78 to 1997–98

	All ages	60–74	75–84	85+
1977–78				
Excess winter deaths[1]	41,240	12,540	15,090	10,780
Percentage increase in mortality in winter	23	19	27	37
1982–83				
Excess winter deaths[1]	42,820	11,270	16,660	12,350
Percentage increase in mortality in winter	24	18	28	40
1987–88				
Excess winter deaths[1]	32,970	8,160	12,420	10,490
Percentage increase in mortality in winter	18	14	20	29
1992–93				
Excess winter deaths[1]	25,650	5,690	9,330	9,490
Percentage increase in mortality in winter	15	11	16	22

Excess winter mortality, England and Wales 1977–78 to 1997–98

	All ages	*60–74*	*75–84*	*85+*
1997–98 [2]				
Excess winter deaths[1]	23,220	4,940	7,890	9,140
Percentage increase in mortality in winter	13	11	14	19

[1] Rounded to the nearest 10
[2] Provisional

Excess winter deaths are defined as the difference between the number of deaths during the four winter months (December to March) and the average of the number of deaths during the preceding autumn (August to November) and the following summer (April to July).

National Minimum Wage

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many of those who will benefit from the national minimum wage are resident in Doncaster, Central. [66566]

Ms Hewitt: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Ms Rosie Winterton, dated 25 January 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question on the National Minimum Wage (NMW).

Available information is taken from the New Earnings Survey (NES). As the NES does not collect information on employees' home addresses I have provided information for those who work, not live, in Doncaster Central.

The NMW will become effective in April 1999 and has been set at £3.60 for workers aged over 21. A development rate of £3.00 per hour will apply for those aged 18 to 21. Workers aged 16 and 17 and all those apprenticeships will be exempt.

The Low Pay Commission, in arriving at their recommendations, had to adjust 1999 pay rates to 1998 values. Their methodology produces £3.50 and £2.90 as the 1998 values of the government's preferred rates.

The latest available information, from the 1998 NES, shows that of those over 21 years of age who are affected by the NMW in the UK, 0.3 per cent. work in the parliamentary constituency of Doncaster Central. The information is given as a percentage of workers because appropriate grossing factors for the NES sample are not available at very detailed levels of disaggregation. I am unable to provide data for employees aged 18 to 21 years because the sample size is too small for a reliable estimate to be produced. I will arrange for a copy of this letter to be placed in the Library.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Al Shifa Factory, Khartoum

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the importance of anti-parasitic products produced at the Al Shifa plant in maintaining animal health in Sudan. [67645]

Clare Short: Our assistance to Sudan is concentrated on the most pressing humanitarian needs and we are not involved in animal health programmes.

Because of the civil war, any drugs produced by the Al Shifa plant in Khartoum would not have been available in the rebel held south, where most of the suffering occurs.

The main threat to animal health in Sudan is rinderpest. The 1998 UN Consolidated Appeal states that

"the conflict has completely destroyed the pre-war annual Pan-African Rinderpest Campaign vaccination coverage and animal health services".

The long running civil war is the prime cause of suffering in Sudan. We will continue to press both sides of the conflict to undertake serious negotiations towards a lasting and just peace.

Coral Reefs

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action the Government have taken since his oral statement in the Adjournment debate on 1 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 324–30, to protect coral reefs. [65477]

Mr. Foulkes: I have been asked to reply.

Since the Adjournment debate on 1 July, we have maintained our effort to conserve coral reefs, monitor their status and help to achieve their sustainable use.

The Department for International Development (DFID) has further extended its support for the creation of a South Asia Regional Coral Reef Monitoring Network in Sri Lanka, Maldives and India, being a contribution to the global network sponsored by the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). The programme has trained national managers to monitor the biophysical status of reef resources and the use of these resources by dependent coastal communities. DFID has also supported their participation in regional and international planning processes. An independent review in September 1998 concluded that the DFID/IOC programme has laid a very solid foundation for future development of the Global Coral Reef Monitoring Network.

A UK/Caribbean Regional Workshop in Jamaica during October 1998, funded by FCO and DFID, attracted representatives from 22 Caribbean States to consider the conservation status of marine biodiversity in the Caribbean including threats to the coral reefs of the region. The results of this Caribbean meeting were reported to the Second London Oceans Workshop sponsored by Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR), attended by delegations from 40 countries, at which the keynote address by the Deputy Prime Minister focused on

the central role of coral reefs as indicators of the health of the oceans, and on the need to take action to protect both reefs and other sensitive marine ecosystems.

During December 1998, DFID approved funding of £0.6 million to extend for a further three year period the programme implemented by the International Centre for Living Aquatic Resources Management (ICLARM) studying the social, economic and environmental benefits which have arisen from the protection of coral reefs in Jamaica and in British Virgin Islands.

DFID has also approved new support for the Coastal Resources Management Project providing advice to the Government of Turks and Caicos Islands for the protection and management of a marine protected area including some spectacular coral reefs, and the development of local capacity and infrastructure to ensure that this is a long sustained process.

The UK's ratification of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance has been extended to the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) and this came into force on 8 January 1999. BIOT is now preparing to put forward for listing as a Ramsar site an area of the Chagos Archipelago which includes a number of globally outstanding coral reefs.

Child Labour

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the countries with which she is having discussions regarding use of child labour. [66651]

Clare Short: Our work on child labour currently involves the following countries:

India
Pakistan
Bangladesh
Nepal
Thailand
Cambodia
Laos
Vietnam
China
Kenya
South Africa
Tanzania
Zambia
Zimbabwe.

In addition, we are supporting the UK-based Ethical Trading Initiative, which aims to investigate ways of dealing with labour issues in supermarket and other supply chains. We have also contributed $1 million to the International Labour Organisation's International Programme for the Elimination of Child Labour which has over 50 participating countries. In July last year, with the aim of engaging workers organisations, we staged a child labour workshop at which unions and NGOs from the south and the north could exchange ideas.

PRIME MINISTER

Prisoners of War (Japan)

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Prime Minister when the hon. Member for Walsall, North will receive a reply to his letter of 7 December regarding former prisoners of war of the Japanese. [66583]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* I replied to my hon. Friend on 22 January.

Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister what invitations have been extended to political parties other than the Liberal Democrats to develop policy jointly with the Government using the JCCC mechanism. [66879]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 21 January 1999]:* None.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the membership of the JCCC. [67688]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Mr. Clarke) on 21 October 1998, *Official Report*, columns *1123–35*.

Sudan

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will assess the report from the Monterey Institute of International Studies in relation to the reported opposition by the US Attorney-General to the bombing of the Al Shifa plant in Sudan. [67644]

The Prime Minister: As I said at the time of the strike against Al Shifa, the United States said that they had compelling evidence that the chemical plant was being used for the manufacture of chemical weapons materials.

It is not for me to comment on what this study claims to be the reported opinions of the US Attorney-General.

Iraq

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 18 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *342*, what proposals have been made by the Russians to find a way forward in respect of Iraq. [67348]

The Prime Minister: The Russians have circulated a paper informally among Security Council members, proposing a number of ideas on how the Council might wish to proceed in dealing with Iraq's continued failure to meet its obligations under Security Council resolutions, particularly on its weapons of mass destruction programmes. The Russians have not yet made these ideas public. These and French proposals tabled earlier will be discussed further in the Security Council in the near future.

Economic and Monetary Union

Mr. Soames: To ask the Prime Minister if he will publish a White Paper on the constitutional implications for Great Britain of joining the economic and monetary union. [67277]

The Prime Minister: In his statement to the House of Commons on 27 October 1997, *Official Report*, columns 583–88, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer set out clearly the Government's view of the constitutional implications of joining the single currency.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Overseas Companies (Funding)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much Government funding has been given to overseas companies in the last 10 years for the establishment of factories in the United Kingdom that have closed in the first three years of operation or never opened. [66026]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* Comprehensive information on total Government funding given to foreign owned companies and the number of associated factory closures is not held centrally. To provide such information would involve disproportionate cost.

However, for Regional Selective Assistance (RSA), the DTI's main investment grant scheme, available data show that, in the last 10 years, over 300 foreign owned companies accepted offers of RSA for new start-up projects in GB. Grant payments to these companies amounted to £227 million. Within three years of accepting offers, two of these companies were subject to legal process and a further six companies were invoiced for full recovery of grant paid because the RSA projects were abandoned. A total of £1.5 million grant was involved of which £150k has been recovered to date. The recoveries do not include possible action to recover grant paid in the case of Siemens.

Departmental Assistance

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what financial assistance the Government have provided to small businesses to assist them in preparing for *(a)* the euro and *(b)* the millennium bug. [66024]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The Government funded a major campaign to raise awareness among small and medium enterprises (SMEs) of the implications of the euro and encourage them to send for the Treasury's euro preparation factsheets. This campaign is also supported by a website and practical support for 12 regional euro forums, Business Links and other sources of advice for SMEs. No direct financial assistance to help firms prepare for the euro has, however, been made available.

My Department set up Action 2000 which has a budget of £19.3 million to lead the work on behalf of Government in ensuring that small businesses are aware of, and obtain help in, dealing with the millennium bug. Action 2000 is working regionally with Business Links and other business support organisations to deliver practical advice and guidance to SMEs, signposting local services and consultants. Since last June, there have been some 170,000 requests for the Action Pack published by Action 2000 and 150,000 calls to its Action Line.

The Government have made £26 million available to help small and medium enterprises train their staff to tackle the date change problem. Employers with 250 employees or fewer are eligible for 100 per cent. grants for sending existing staff or new recruits on short courses in skills related to dealing with the millennium bug. Courses are provided by the training organisations who have been accredited for the programme by the IT National Training Organisation.

White Goods

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what plans he has to ensure competition and choice for consumers purchasing electrical appliances; [66572]

(2) if he will make a statement on the findings of his Department's survey on the prices of washing machines in retail outlets; [66571]

(3) what further steps he is taking to introduce competition in the market for white goods. [66570]

Dr. Howells: Under UK competition legislation, the Director General of Fair Trading is responsible for keeping the operation of markets under review and considering allegations of anti-competitive behaviour, abuse of monopoly power or restrictive trade practices.

As part of his responsibilities, the Director General is keeping under review compliance with the Order made by my right hon. Friend the former President of the Board of Trade on 19 May 1998, following the 1997 Monopolies and Mergers Commission report on the supply of eight categories of domestic electrical goods (including washing machines). The Order prohibits suppliers of those goods from recommending retail prices to retailers, and from influencing the prices at which retailers sell their goods, and came into force on 1 September 1998.

The Government are keen to ensure that UK consumers are not disadvantaged by anti-competitive practices. The new Competition Act 1998 therefore gives the Director General tougher powers to investigate anti-competitive practices. For the first time, it gives him powers to seize company records, take quick action to halt commercial practices which are anti-competitive and fine companies whose behaviour is found to be anti-competitive.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent discussions he has had with consumer groups about price competition in the white goods sector. [66576]

Dr. Howells: I meet with consumer groups regularly to discuss a wide range of issues, and will continue to do so.

Embedded Generators

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what was the total installed capacity of embedded generators for each of the last five years for which data are available; [66915]

(2) how many units of electricity were supplied to the distribution system by embedded generators in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [66899]

Mr. Battle: No central records are kept of the precise amount of generating capacity embedded within the distribution networks of electricity companies in the United Kingdom, nor of the output from such capacity.

However, the capacity of generating plant other than that owned by major power producers over the latest five years for which data are available was as follows:

	GW
end December 1993	3.6
end December 1994	3.8
end December 1995	3.9
end December 1996	4.2
end December 1997	4.2

Source:
Digest of United Kingdom Energy Statistics 1998; Table 6.5.

The figures may over-estimate the amount of embedded capacity since some generating plants may not be capable of exporting electricity to the local network or local conditions may be such that there are limits on the capacity that can be exported. However, the figures may also understate the amount of embedded capacity to the extent that some of the plant belonging to major power producers is embedded.

In each of the last five years, the following quantities of electricity were supplied to the public distribution system in the United Kingdom by generators other than major power producers:

	TWh
1993	3.2
1994	3.9
1995	3.2
1996	3.2
1997	3.4

Source:
Digest of United Kingdom Energy Statistics 1998; Table 6.3.

These figures do not include electricity generated by embedded stations but consumed on the site where generated. Neither do they include generation from any embedded station owned by major power producers.

Note:

Major power producers are those companies whose prime purpose is the generation of electricity. The public distribution system comprises the transmission and distribution grids in England and Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.

Anglo-Yemeni Trade Relations

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on Anglo-Yemeni trade relations. [66691]

Mr. Wilson: UK-Yemeni trade relations remain stable. The official figures for 1997 are as shown, together with the latest available figures for January to November 1998:

UK trade in goods with Yemen

£ million

	1997	*January to November 1998*
UK Exports	72.1	70.0
UK Imports	5.1	3.2
UK Balance	67.0	66.8

Source:
HM Customs & Excise Business Monitor MM20 DTI/ES Statistics

Bananas

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the changing trading relationships between the United States of America and *(a)* the European Union as a single entity and *(b)* individual EU member states with reference to the continuing sanctions relating to the trade dispute over bananas. [67116]

Mr. Wilson: The European Union acts as a single entity in external trade policy matters, under Article 113 of the EC Treaty. There are currently no sanctions in place against EU exports to the US, and intensive efforts to avoid such action is continuing.

Nuclear Waste

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress has been made by BNFL in developing the tank waste remediation system for vitrification of long-lived radioactive wastes at Hanford; and what plans it has to apply this technique to the immobilisation of high level radioactive wastes at BNFL's Sellafield site. [67105]

Mr. Battle: While this is a commercial matter for BNFL, the company announced in July 1998 that they had been awarded the contract for the first phase in developing the tank waste remediation system at Hanford. Much of the technology and approach for this contract has been developed at BNFL's Sellafield site.

This phase involves BNFL in carrying out a 2 year study on the feasibility of designing and constructing a processing facility to immobilise USDOE-owned radioactive waste in glass form using vitrification technology.

Wealth Warnings (Radio)

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects to announce the results of the consultation completed in May 1998 on the abolition of wealth warnings on commercial radio; and if he will make a statement. [66818]

Dr. Howells: I will make an announcement shortly.

Defence and Security Equipment Exports

Mr. Lock: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list in respect of foreign *(a)* companies and *(b)* Governments which have been given guarantees in relation to defence and security equipment in the past three

years (i) the name of the country to which defence and security equipment has been sold, (ii) the level of debt guaranteed for sales to each country in each of the last three years and (iii) the amount of that debt which was paid out by the ECGD in each of the last three years. [66981]

Mr. Wilson: The following tables detail by country the amount of business which ECGD has guaranteed for sales to defence buyers in each of the last three years and the incidence of claims under these same guarantees.

£ million

Country	*Amount guaranteed*	*Amount paid as claims under these Guarantees 1996–97 to 1998–99*
1996–97		
Bahrain	1.4	0
Indonesia	143.6	[1]1.7
Republic of Korea	13.6	0
Lithuania	1.5	0
Qatar	5.5	0
Saudi Arabia	225	0
Singapore	18.6	0
Turkey	2.0	0
1997–98		
Egypt	8.8	0
Greece	18.7	0
Indonesia	16.5	0
Italy	2.7	0
Republic of Korea	62.4	0
Kuwait	55.7	0
Lithuania	4.8	0
Oman	908	0
Qatar	222.9	0
Saudi Arabia	225	0
Thailand	27.3	0
Turkey	35.6	0
United Arab Emirates	9.8	0
USA	58.3	0
1998–99 (to 20 January)		
Brazil	29.3	0
Brunei	580	0
India	14.3	0
Indonesia	5.8	0
Italy	1.5	0
Oman	21.1	0
Sweden	4.1	0
USA	6.9	0

[1] Paid 1998–99

Shoe Industry

Mr. Collins: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what assessment he has made of the state of the UK shoe manufacturing industry; [67014]

(2) what proposals he has for a national strategy for the UK shoe manufacturing industry. [67016]

Mr. Battle: The DTI prepared a Competitive Analysis of the Footwear Industry which was issued in December 1996. I have arranged for copies to be placed in the Library of the House.

I launched an Action Plan to improve the competitiveness of the UK footwear industry at the National Footwear Conference in Rossendale in February 1998. The Plan is being taken forward by the Footwear Liaison Action Group (FLAG). This is an industry led Group which has representatives from companies, trade associations, unions, training organisations, Business Links, DTI and DFEE.

Rover-BMW Cars

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the expected future production by Rover-BMW cars. [67053]

Mr. Battle: Rover Group produce a range of vehicles in the UK from the Mini to the Land Rover series. Last year, Rover launched the new R75 which will be produced at Cowley and go on sale this year as a replacement for the 600–800 models. And in November, Bernd Pischestreider, Chairman of BMW, announced that the new Mini will be produced at Longbridge from 2000.

Longbridge currently produces the Rover 200 and 400 models, which are due to be replaced early in the new millennium. BMW has yet to make a decision as to where the new model will be produced.

The Government naturally remain in close contact with both Rover and BMW on many issues including the location of production of future models.

EU Research Council

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the outcome of the EU Research Council held on 22 December 1998. [67650]

Mr. Byers: Lord Sainsbury represented the UK at the meeting of the EU Research Council on 22 December 1998. I am pleased to say that the Council reached final agreement on the legislation for the Fifth Framework Programme for Research and Development (FP5), paving the way for the launch of the programme in the next few weeks. Agreement on FP5 marks a major step forward in Europe's research effort, opening up new opportunities for collaborative research tackling major European challenges relating to competitiveness and the quality of life. I look forward to continued strong participation by UK researchers.

The Council adopted Decisions on the two Framework Programmes that, under the EC Treaty and the Euratom Treaty, set the budget and broad priorities for FP5, and on the rules for detailed participation in the programme stemming from Article 130j of the EC Treaty. It reached political agreement on FP5's ten specific programmes, which set out scientific and technological content in detail and provide for the internal distribution of each programme's budget, in preparation for formal adoption later this month.

The Council also agreed conclusions calling for greater emphasis on research, development and innovation activities in the EU's MEDA programme for development co-operation with Mediterranean countries. It approved signature of an agreement for scientific and technological co-operation between the European Community and

China and made decisions progressing a number of other scientific and technological co-operation agreements between the Community third countries.

Textile Industry

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress he has made towards developing a strategy for future support for the textile industry; and if he will make a statement. [67734]

Mr. Battle: Last year, a joint industry-union group produced an Action Plan for the Textiles and Clothing Industry. I subsequently met the authors of this Document and offered the services of DTI officials to facilitate the production, by an industry-led Group, of a more detailed strategy for the industry. The industry and the unions decided to take the initiative forward and have formed the Textiles and Clothing Strategy Group. My Department will provide the Group's secretariat. To ensure that the Group is wholly representative of the industry and its supply chain, the Group is to include representatives from trade associations, unions, the retail sector, manufacturing, academia and Government. The first meeting of the Group will be on 1 February and preparatory work has already begun.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Local Government Finance

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will publish a table showing total local authority capital expenditure allocations for transport for the year 1999–2000; and for each of the previous eight years; [65242]

(2) if he will publish a table indicating local authority transport capital expenditure allocations for 1999–2000 for existing commitments and new major schemes; and the equivalent figures for each of the previous eight years. [65243]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* As part of our commitment to integrated transport policies as set out in "A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone", in the 1999–2000 local transport capital settlement we increased support to local transport packages, local safety schemes and the maintenance of highways and bridges. We also reintroduced funding for rural and non-package minor works, which had been suspended for the two previous settlements. The information is shown in the following table.

Local transport capital settlements[1]

£ million

Allocation category	*1991–92*	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
Principal road carriageway maintenance	0	95	173	151	141	86	90	80	113
Bridge assessment and strengthening	91	111	137	137	117	101	110	100	128
Local safety schemes	0	0	0	50	50	55	60	50	60
Local authority packages	0	0	0	10	64	79	79	85	135
Minor works	75	89	115	60	64	40	0	0	25
Grant reduction for previous underspends	–48	–54	–64	–67	–67	–40	–16	–7	–4
Existing commitments[2]	561	522	529	431	485	463	407	308	173
New major schemes	41	61	93	47	39	6	0	0	6
Total	768	877	1,047	886	960	830	746	623	641

[1] Total for 1990–2000 excludes support for European Regional Development Fund grant (£26 million in 1998–99), which is now funded separately from the local transport capital settlement.
[2] Support for Croydon Tramlink and South Yorkshire Supertram.

Rainham Marsh

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what information *(a)* his Department and *(b)* English Partnerships holds relating to contamination of land at Rainham Marsh in Havering; and if he will place such information in the Library. [65901]

Mr. Meale: When English Partnerships was formed in 1993 it also inherited, acting as Agent for the Secretary of State, a commitment to pay Derelict Land Grant to the London Borough of Havering, for the preparation of site investigation reports. A contamination report and consequently a remediation report, both funded by Derelict Land Grant, via English Partnerships, have been produced. Copies of the reports are available upon request from the London Borough of Havering, who own the Havering Riverside site (known as Rainham Marsh) and commissioned production of the reports.

Asbestos

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to ban the import of all forms of asbestos; if he will list those members of the EU which have introduced such a ban; and if he will make a statement. [66058]

Mr. Meacher: We are firmly committed both to a national and to a Europe-wide solution to the problem of asbestos, based on sound science. It is increasingly likely that the European Commission's draft proposals for further restrictions on asbestos marketing and use within the EU will be voted on by Member States in March 1999. At around the same time, I expect to receive the Health and Safety Commission's recommendation following its recent consultation exercise on a British ban.

I understand that Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden have asbestos bans in place.

Local Government Modernisation

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he will require town and parish councils to take as part of his plans for the modernisation of local government. [65772]

Mr. Raynsford: As our White Paper "Modern Local Government—In Touch with the People" makes clear, it is important that parish councils embrace the culture of openness and accountability, putting their local people first. Our modernisation agenda therefore provides for such councils to continue to play their local democratic role and to be subject—as appropriate to their size and functions—to the disciplines of the new ethical framework and the duty of best value.

London Underground (Funding)

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how London Underground will be funded when the central Government grant is phased out in 2000. [66094]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We are keeping funding for London Underground under review with London Transport, and will take decisions in the light of progress to implement the public private partnership and LT's overall financial position.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on what occasions Ministers in his Department have made journeys in non-scheduled or private aeroplanes since 1 May 1997; and at what cost to public funds. [66463]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* I refer to my answer of 19 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *838–39*, to the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples).

Water and Sewerage Companies

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures he proposes to take to ensure that information is made publicly available to enable a proper scrutiny of the environmental and public health performance of the water and sewerage companies; and if he will make a statement. [66555]

Mr. Meale: Details of companies' discharge consents and compliance monitoring data for both consents and quality standards set for bodies of water, including bathing water quality results, are made publicly available on the Environment Agency's statutory pollution control registers, as are details of authorisations of processes subject to integrated pollution control (IPC). The Agency also compiles an inventory of emissions from processes subject to IPC, which it proposes to extend to require reporting of emissions by other processes it regulates, such as sewage treatment works.

As regards drinking water, water companies are required to compile annual records, including details of tests of water quality which they have conducted, in respect of each of their water supply zones. This information is available for public inspection. In addition, the Chief Inspector of the Drinking Water Inspectorate produces an annual report of checks made by the Inspectorate on the quality of water supplied by water companies.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the length of critical sewers in *(a)* grade 1, *(b)* grade 2, *(c)* grade 3, *(d)* grade 4 and *(e)* grade 5 by water and sewerage company. [66557]

Mr. Meale: This information is not available in the form requested but Ofwat's annual reports on Financial Performance and Capital Investment, copies of which are in the Library of the House, list the total lengths of critical sewers renovated and replaced each year and in 1997–98 these renovations and replacements were at their highest level since 1991–92.

Ofwat assesses the performance of underground assets by reference to trends in their serviceability to customers and they will publish more information about serviceability of assets later this year.

National Walking Strategy

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to publish the National Walking Strategy consultation document; and if he will make a statement. [66335]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Walking Steering Group completed a report late last year. The Government are grateful to the Group for the work that they put into producing this document. We are committed to encouraging walking as part of our policy of reducing dependency upon the private motor car and we will be publishing a Government strategy statement shortly.

Construction Industry

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the policy of his Department on the setting-up of elected safety representatives and safety committees within the construction industry; and if he will make a statement. [66649]

Mr. Meale: The Government place great importance on the role of safety representatives and the contribution which employees can play in securing health and safety both in the construction sector and more widely. I hope that wherever they are able to do so, trade unions will appoint safety representatives to work with employers to improve standards of health and safety in the workplace.

Statutory arrangements for the appointment of safety representatives by recognised trade unions, and the establishment of safety committees where two or more safety representatives request this, are laid down in the Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977. These regulations apply in construction as in other sectors onshore. Where there are groups of employees who are not covered by safety representatives appointed under the 1977 regulations, their employer has a duty, under the Health and Safety (Consultation with Employees) Regulations 1996, to consult them on matters related to their health and safety, either direct or through representatives elected by the employees for that purpose.

In addition, the Construction (Design and Management) Regulations 1994 require the principal contractor to ensure that employees and the self-employed are able to discuss and offer advice on matters which might affect their health and safety and to ensure that there are arrangements for the co-ordination of the views of employees or their representatives.

We have asked the Health and Safety Commission to review arrangements for health and safety consultation and representation, and to consider ways to enhance the role of safety representatives.

Petrus Oil Ltd.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many cases the Environment Agency has taken to court concerning Petrus Oil Ltd.; and if he will list the outcome of each case. [66853]

Mr. Meale: The Environment Agency has brought prosecution cases against Petrus Oil Ltd. arising from four separate pollution incidents on 28 September 1996, 17 October 1996, 14 April 1997 and 1 July 1997.

All the cases were consolidated into one indictment of 11 counts. Counts 1, 3, 5 and 6 have been stayed by the judge on the basis of abuse of process. Counts 2 and 4 lie on the file as not justifying the expense of a Crown Court trial in isolation. Counts 7–11 relating to the incidents on 14 April 1997 and 1 July 1997 remain to be decided and await the outcome of the Revocation Appeal Inquiry which commences on 2 March 1999 in Stoke-on-Trent.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the irrecoverable costs to the Environment Agency of its cases relating to Petrus Oil Ltd. indicating the amount of costs and date of court order for the Environment Agency to reimburse Petrus Oil Ltd. [66854]

Mr. Meale: The irrecoverable costs to the Environment Agency of its cases relating to Petrus Oil Ltd. are difficult to estimate but will be in the region of £150,000 including Counsel's fees, staff costs and consultancy fees. The order for costs to be paid by the Environment Agency was made on 18 December 1998 and was for £118,605.45.

Used Oils

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his policy on the disposal of used oils. [66851]

Mr. Meale: The Government's policy on waste disposal, including used oils, is being reviewed as part of the review of the waste strategy. The consultation paper, Less Waste More Value (DETR 1998) sets out the policy that decisions on the management of waste should be based on the Best Practical Environmental Option (BPEO) with the waste management hierarchy as a guide to making decisions under this principle. Under the hierarchy the most effective solution is, usually, not to produce the waste at all. Failing that, value should be recovered from waste. In Less Waste More Value the Government set out their view that incineration with energy recovery should not be undertaken without consideration first being given to the possibility of recycling. Waste should, therefore, only be disposed of once options for re-use and recovery have been considered.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many sites are licensed for the re-refining of used oils. [66852]

Mr. Meale: Within England and Wales five sites are authorised by the Environment Agency under Part I of the Environment Protection Act 1990 for re-refining of used oils.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if used oils are re-refined in EC and OECD countries. [66873]

Mr. Meale: Two main companies re-refine used oils in the United Kingdom. A study for the European Commission in 1996, showed that used oil is re-refined in other European Union countries including, Germany, Italy, France and Spain. We are also aware that re-refining takes place in other OECD countries, including New Zealand and the United States.

Court Costs

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his policy concerning the timing of the payment of court costs. [66855]

Mr. Meale: Costs due to be paid under a court order by my Department or a body for which I am responsible should be paid promptly, subject to any available remedy by way of appeal or application to set aside the order.

Regional Development Agencies

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Regional Development Agency for the North west will be established; and where its offices will be located. [66733]

Mr. Meale: We appointed the Board members for Regional Development Agencies in each of the regions outside London which were established 14 December 1998. The Agencies will become operational from 1 April 1999. The North West Development Agency is currently based in temporary accommodation in Warrington and is considering its future location requirements. These are likely to include Head Office and a number of sub-regional offices.

Liverpool Lime Street-Freshfield Station Rail Line

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the adequacy of track maintenance carried out by Railtrack on the line between Liverpool Lime Street and Freshfield Station in Merseyside. [66732]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Within the last three months the Health & Safety Executive's (HSE's) Railway Inspectorate has inspected the adequacy of track maintenance carried out by Railtrack on the line between Liverpool and Southport (which includes Freshfield station). This action was taken as a direct result of

complaints from local residents concerned about noise and vibration resulting from the operation of the railway. HSE's inspection did not find that track maintenance standards presented a risk to the health and safety of passengers or railway employees. A factual statement to this effect was provided to the local authority.

Local Government

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the numbers of local authorities that will adopt the cabinet-style model of local government; and if he will list them. [66729]

Mr. Raynsford: The Government have not made any such estimate; councils will need to consult their local communities before deciding which model to adopt.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to encourage local authorities to make the decision process of local government more accessible to the public. [66730]

Mr. Raynsford: The Local Government Bill, which received its Second Reading on 12 January, is the first step in delivering our wide-ranging agenda for bringing councils closer to the people which was set out in our White Paper "Modern Local Government—In Touch with the People". Our proposals to transform the political management and ethical framework of councils will be published soon in a draft Bill and other measures will follow.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many local authorities have offered a referendum to the public following the White Paper on local government reform. [66731]

Mr. Raynsford: We are aware that a number of councils have already signalled their intention to hold referendums on reforms to their political management structures.

Beaches

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assistance his Department is providing to ensure that beaches in the North West are improved to Blue Flag standard. [66929]

Mr. Meale: The Environment Agency and North West Water are working together closely and intensively to raise standards of bathing water quality in the north west. Last year we approved additional works to bring improvements to the Fylde Coast bathing waters. Options for further investment to achieve water quality required for Blue Flag status are being considered as part of the current review of water company price limits form 2000–05.

Pesticides

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for which pesticides he has received unpublished scientific evidence that relates to the introduction of additional financial revenues which would lead to quantified changes in the volume of their use. [66867]

Mr. Meale: The Government have been exploring the possibility of introducing a pesticide tax as a component of its minimisation policy. The consultants engaged on this work have relied on scientific information available in the published literature about the nature of active ingredients when considering various designs for a tax.

Catalytic Converters

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to permit *(a)* comparable and *(b)* better-performing technology to displace catalytic converters. [66712]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The introduction of catalytic converters on vehicles has been a major factor in reducing traffic pollution and contributing to improvements in air quality. The Government have a range of measures promoting cleaner vehicles, but these are not aimed either at favouring or displacing catalyst technology. Tighter exhaust emission standards to be introduced in 2000, with a further tightening in 2005 and beyond, will see an expansion of effective emission reduction technology on new petrol, diesel and gas powered vehicles. Catalysts are also a key factor in the development of future fuel cell technology. Only pure electric vehicles have no need for catalysts.

Purchasers of low emission technology vehicles—both electric and catalysed—are eligible for financial support through the Energy Saving Trust's "Powershift" programme. We are also looking at electric, hybrid and fuel cell technologies through the DTI's Foresight Vehicle Programme.

Allotments

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many allotment sites have been *(a)* approved for sale and *(b)* sold since 24 June 1998. [67026]

Mr. Caborn: The Secretary of State has given his consent for the sale of the following statutory allotment sites since 24 June 1998. The Department does not record whether sites are actually sold after consent for sale is given.

Date	*Allotment site*
9 July	Wharf Road, Woodston
31 July	Castleman Road, Chichester
10 August	Broadwater Gardens, Hillingdon
17 August	Efford Crescent, Plymouth
17 August	Green Street, Eastbourne
2 October	Woodhall, Chelmsford
16 October	Bartram Avenue, Braintree
17 November	Mimms Hall Road, Potters Bar
30 November	Hawcliffe Road, Mountsorrel
9 December	Hengrove Farm, Bristol
16 December	Wilton Road, Camberley
5 January	Yorktown Trading Estate, Surrey Heath

Housing

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many new housing units were built and how many existing housing units were cleared in each local authority area in Tyne and Wear and Northumberland in the calendar years 1993 to 1998. [67299]

Mr. Raynsford: The statistics relate to the number of housing units completed by calendar years from 1993 to November 1998 (provisional) and all demolition figures for financial years from 1992–93 to 1996–97. (The demolitions data are collected on a financial years basis only.)

Housebuilding completions

	1993	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*[1]1998*
Tyne & Wear						
Gateshead	492	514	330	844	363	389
Newcastle upon Tyne	474	520	690	1,210	254	341
N. Tyneside	732	914	1,019	1,933	727	630
S. Tyneside	485	323	288	611	218	140
Sunderland	560	317	551	868	490	459
Northumberland						
Alnwick	96	99	45	144	107	67
Berwick upon Tweed	74	36	65	101	83	109
Blyth Valley	0	0	0	0	0	0
Castle Morpeth	72	101	94	195	170	117
Tynedale	172	92	131	223	166	137
Wansbeck	121	202	264	466	286	127

[1] Date up to the end of November 1998

Demolitions

	1992–93	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*
Tyne & Wear					
Gateshead	1	0	29	0	226
Newcastle upon Tyne	0	0	44	54	48
N. Tyneside	327	0	0	0	0
S. Tyneside	153	82	80	24	9
Sunderland	71	0	0	0	249
Northumberland					
Alnwick	1	0	0	0	0
Berwick upon Tweed	0	0	0	0	0
Blyth Valley	0	0	0	0	0
Castle Morpeth	0	0	0	0	0
Tynedale	0	0	0	0	0
Wansbeck	1	1	0	0	0

National Bus Company

Mr. Stevenson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made towards resolving the issue of the former National Bus Company pension scheme; and if he will make a statement. [67102]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell) on 12 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *167*.

Genetically Modified Organisms

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what evidence he has assessed that biotechnology may cause permanent changes to the ecosystem. [66680]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 21 January 1999]:* All applications for consent to release GM crops are assessed on a case by case basis. The applicants for consent are required to submit evidence regarding the potential impact on the environment. This evidence may be based on the applicants own trials and on studies carried out by independent workers.

In deciding whether or not to grant consent, the Government are advised by the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE). A consent would only be granted if the evidence suggests that the GMOs are unlikely to result in harm to human health and the environment occurring.

Further evidence is gathered through a Government funded research programme which investigates specific issues in order to underpin the risk assessment and decision making process.

An ACRE sub-group will be set up shortly to consider the wider biodiversity implications of the introduction of GMOs, taking into account current practices and the Government's Biodiversity commitments, to halt and where possible reverse declines in farmland wildlife. Where such research indicates that GM crops have or could cause reductions in this wildlife, action will be taken to stop this.

A number of research studies have indicated potential interference with ecological systems from GM crops, with varying degrees of permanance.

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the potential of horizontal gene transfer biotechnology to produce new viruses and bacteria. [66684]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 21 January 1999]:* Horizontal gene transfer technologies are the basis of modern biotechnology and allow the transfer of genes between unrelated species under contained laboratory conditions. Such work often involves the production genetically modified viruses and bacteria as vectors for gene transfer or research tools. All such work is subject to a risk assessment which considers the potential to unintentionally create new viruses and bacteria that may be pathogenic to man or harmful in the wider environment. If the risk assessment indicated there may be a danger then the work would either not be allowed or it would proceed under the highest containment levels. If a risk assessment turned out to be deficient or incorrect it could unwittingly lead to the production of new viruses or bacteria. However, experience of this technology over the last 25 years both in the UK and worldwide has demonstrated that such events are unlikely.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with beekeepers about and what assessment he has made of (i) the possible implications for the health of the bee population and (ii) the possible contamination of honey resulting from the cultivation of GM crops; and if he will make a statement. [67482]

Mr. Meale: My officials have responded to correspondence and telephone inquiries from beekeepers regarding these two issues. The possibility that crops genetically modified to resist attack from insect pests

might also cause harm to non-target beneficial insects is considered in the risk assessment of the approvals procedure. The risks of eating honey made by bees that have visited GM plants have been considered by MAFF. They were advised by the Advisory Committee for Novels Foods and Processes (ACNFP) that the risks were negligible. This is contained in the ACNFP Annual Report 1992, a copy of which is available in the library.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to publish the result of the research project by IACR Rothamsted on the impact on non-target insects of insect-resistant GM crops. [67486]

Mr. Meale: My Department's research contract with IACR Rothamsted to investigate the environmental impact of insect resistance in genetically modified plants with insect resistance genes is due to finish on 31 December this year. The report of the outcome of these studies will be published by the Department early in 2000.

East Midlands Development Agency

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received from Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire concerning the lack of representatives of their counties on the East Midlands Development Agency Board. [67265]

Mr. Meale: Representations have been received from Northamptonshire County Council, Lincolnshire County Council, Wellingborough Borough Council, and West Lindsey District Council; from my hon. Friends the Members for Northampton, South (Mr. Clarke), for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe), for Kettering (Mr. Sawford) and for Lincoln (Gillian Merron) and the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell); and the MEPs from Northampton and Blaby and Lincolnshire and Humberside, South. Representations have also been received from the Northampton Chamber of Commerce, Lincolnshire Industrial Mission and Nene University College Northampton; and a member of the public.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people of Asian origin he has appointed to the Board of the East Midlands Development Agency. [67264]

Mr. Meale: No candidates of Asian origin have been appointed to the Board of the East Midlands Development Agency. People from ethnic minorities make up to 5% of the board membership nationally.

Bridge Strengthening Directive

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many bridges are *(a)* closed and *(b)* weight-limited pending full implementation of bridge strengthening works required under EU Directive 85/3/EEC. [67559]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Bridge closures and weight-limits are decided by the highway authority in each case following risk assessment procedures published by the Highways Agency last year. We have no central record of the numbers of temporary closures and weight limits imposed by local highway authorities pending strengthening of structures.

However, the Directive does allow authorities to place permanent weight restrictions on structures where strengthening is not regarded as necessary on the basis of strategic importance for HGVs. The Transport Policies and Programmes submitted in July 1998 suggest that some 1,000 permanent weight restrictions have been placed as a result of the bridge assessment programme. These are largely on minor roads.

Pending completion of the strengthening programme for Highways Agency bridges, 2 bridges carrying trunk roads or important routes over trunk roads have been temporarily closed and 6 are weight limited.

Sewage Works (Isle of Wight)

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the timing of the introduction of secondary sewage treatment at the new sewage works under construction at Yaverland, Sandown, Isle of Wight. [67563]

Mr. Meale: I refer the hon. Gentleman to my answer of 11 January 1999, *Official Report,* column *47.*

Public Water Supplies

Mr. Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions in what ways he expects the Environment Agency and the Director General of Water Services to ensure that water companies have satisfactory plans for maintaining public water supplies. [67651]

Mr. Meacher: My Department together with the Welsh Office, has today published Maintaining Public Water Supplies—Ministerial guidance to the Director General of Water Services and to the Environment Agency on issues arising in the preparation of Water Resources Plans by the water companies of England and Wales. Copies are available in the Library of the House.

Telecommunications Masts

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the health and associated risks from the placement of telecommunications masts in residential areas; and what plans he has to review his assessment. [67627]

Mr. Raynsford: Guidance on limiting exposure to electro-magnetic radiation is issued by the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB), which has a statutory function to provide advice to Government on all radiation matters. The Board continuously reviews and assesses the published scientific studies covering the fields of biology and medicine, epidemiology and dosimetry, and has concluded that there is no convincing evidence that exposure to emissions from telecommunications transmitters below the recommended guideline levels causes any adverse effects on people's health. In respect of telecommunications base stations, the NRPB further advises that experience with typical personal telecommunications installations has shown that the specified maximum exposure power densities are only likely to be exceeded within a few metres and directly in front of the antenna. However, the strength of radio waves at ground level and in regions accessible to the public tend to be many times below guideline levels and should present

no health risk. My Department has issued for consultation the draft of a joint circular on land use planning and electro-magnetic fields (EMFs). The circular provides advice to local planning authorities in deciding applications for development giving rise to EMFs, such as telecommunications base stations. A copy of the consultation package has been placed in the Library. The closing date for responses is 19 February.

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to review the means by which people are informed of proposed masts for telecommunications; and if he will make a statement. [67648]

Mr. Raynsford: It is important that the public has an opportunity to comment on the proposed installation of telecommunications masts. Where it is proposed to erect a mast subject to a planning application, the statutory requirement for a local authority to publicise any planning application will apply. In respect of mast development carried out under the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 (GPDO), we last year consulted on a number of proposed changes to that Order, including one designed to improve opportunities for informing the public. Following consideration of the responses to our proposals, my hon. Friend the Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning announced in November our intention to introduce a new 42 day prior approval procedure in respect of ground-based masts which it is proposed to erect under the GPDO in place of the current 28 day procedure. This will include a new requirement that the developer should erect a site notice to publicise the development proposed. Local planning authorities will also be advised of the importance of giving additional publicity to the proposal. In this way people will have a better opportunity to comment on the siting and appearance of all proposals to erect ground-based masts under the GPDO.

"Urban Renaissance"

Mr. Gummer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will ensure that copies of his document, "Urban Renaissance", are placed in the Vote Office and that in future all such documents are placed there upon publication. [67254]

Mr. Caborn: The Urban Task Force published their halfway report "Urban Renaissance" on 13 January. The report is largely a summary of the responses received to the consultation on the Urban Task Force's prospectus.

Copies of the document were placed in the House Library on the day of publication and some copies were made available to the Vote Office. I apologise that sufficient copies were not available to meet demand. Further copies are being provided.

The Urban Task Force's recommendations will be set out in their report to the Deputy Prime Minister in the early summer. Copies of this report will be placed in the House Library and the Vote Office.

Council of Ministers Meetings

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which EU Council of Ministers meetings Ministers in his Department plan to attend during the German presidency; and if he will make a statement about each of the matters that will be discussed. [67619]

Mr. Meale: A DETR Minister normally attends meetings of the Environment Council and the Transport Council, and, depending on the business, may attend the Labour and Social Affairs Council. The scheduled dates for these Councils during the German presidency from January to June 1999 are:

Environment Council

11–12 March, 24–25 June

Transport Council

29 March, 17–18 June

Labour and Social Affairs

9 March, 25 May, 22 June (poss.).

The agendas for these meetings have not yet been settled.

Warsaw System

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will publish a current list of parties to the instruments of the Warsaw system for carriage by air. [67617]

Ms Glenda Jackson: This Department has no plans to publish such a list. The International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO), which monitors the status of the various instruments, provides this information. The list was last published in the July/August 1998 edition of the ICAO Journal.

Future Transport System

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to paragraph 2.3 of the White Paper, "A New Deal for Transport", what indicators he proposes to publish in order to measure progress towards a transport system *(a)* which supports more jobs and a strong economy, *(b)* which helps increase prosperity and tackles social exclusion, *(c)* which does not damage health and (e) is sustainable. [67616]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Last year we published our first "Transport Trends" report containing key indicators relevant to many of the objectives set out in the White Paper. We will continue to publish these reports each year so that progress against key indicators can be monitored. The indicators will be developed to include breakdowns by income groups, rural and urban areas and by age and gender so that we can monitor the impact of policies in tackling social exclusion. We will carry out the further work needed to ensure that the range of published indicators is appropriate, seeking advice from the independent Commission for Integrated Transport which is being set up to monitor and advise on progress towards our objectives.

Road Noise

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to paragraph 2.70 of the White Paper, " A New Deal for Transport", what indicators he proposes to publish to measure the impact of road noise *(a)* in urban areas, *(b)* in suburban areas and *(c)* in rural areas. [67613]

Ms Glenda Jackson: As stated in paragraph 2.70 of the White Paper, noise is one of the areas where further work is needed to ensure that indicators are appropriate and effective. This work is being taken forward in conjunction with current work on noise indicators by the European Commission which aims to harmonise methods of calculating noise exposure as part of a proposed Framework Directive on Noise. It would be premature for us to reach conclusions about noise indicators until that work is further advanced.

West Sussex County Council (Road Safety)

Mr. Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will allocate specific funds to West Sussex County Council to improve road safety around schools in Mid Sussex. [67274]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We have already allocated over a million pounds of resources to West Sussex County Council which they could choose to use on capital works to improve road safety around schools in Mid Sussex. It is for the County Council to decide where this funding can be used most effectively to save lives and prevent casualties.

In the Local Transport Capital Expenditure Settlement for 1999–00 we have allocated £526,000 to the County Council for expenditure on Local Safety Schemes, and £400,000 for expenditure on rural and non-package minor works. In addition, we have allocated £100,000 for expenditure on the East Grinstead transport package, which includes a safer routes to schools initiative.

Further local transport capital funds for use in 2000–01 will be provided to all English highway authorities later this year following assessment of their local transport plans.

Welsh Highland Railway

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what reasons underlie the delay in announcing a decision on the inquiry into the application by the Ffestiniog Railway Company to reopen the Welsh Highland Railway between Dinas and Porthmadog; and if he will make a statement. [67136]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Inspector's report following the public inquiry is being considered by the Secretary of State. A decision will be made as soon as possible. It would not be appropriate for me to comment further whilst the matter is before the Secretary of State.

Thaumasite

Mr. Donald Anderson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what are the findings of the expert group looking into thaumasite. [67914]

Mr. Raynsford: I am today publishing the Report of the Expert Group which has under the chairmanship of Professor Leslie Clark, President of the Institution of Structural Engineers, been studying the thaumasite form of sulfate attack on concrete.

I announced the appointment of Professor Clark to chair an expert group on 1 April 1998, *Official Report*, columns *532–33*, following the discovery by the Highways Agency during bridge strengthening operations on the M5 in Gloucestershire of unexpected deterioration in some of the concrete columns below ground level. This was identified by the Building Research Establishment as the thaumasite form of sulfate attack.

I asked the Expert Group to consider the available research and other evidence on thausmasite and to report giving advice and guidance on the implications for existing buildings and structures and on the specification and design of new construction. The Group was also asked to recommend any longer term programme of investigations and research which it considered necessary.

The Expert Group reported to me at the beginning of December and I have since discussed the conclusions and recommendations with Professor Clark. I am very grateful to him and all his colleagues on the Expert Group for producing such a thorough and well-considered Report in a technically complex area in such a short period of time. It provides a great deal of re-assurance about the extent of the problem.

The main findings of the Group are that:

the thaumasite form of sulfate attack will only occur in buried Portland cement based concretes when all the primary risk factors are present simultaneously and developed to a significant degree. These primary risk factors are:

- the presence of sulfates and/or sulphides in the ground;
- the presence of mobile groundwater;
- the presence of carbonate, generally in the concrete aggregates; and
- low temperatures

the probability of all these factors being present simultaneously is low for most existing buildings and structures and the number potentially at risk of the occurrence in the UK is considered small;

the structural consequences of thausmasite attack are rarely of serious concern in respect of public safety, as most buildings would exhibit warning signs of distress well before there was any danger of collapse;

it is not necessary to specifically inspect domestic properties for occurrence of thaumasite attack in foundations or above ground. Data from the National House Building Council indicate that the incidence of sulfate attack in domestic properties is very small in relation to other building defects. Thaumasite can be addressed as part of general repair and maintenance of houses.

The Report recommends a range of options open to specifiers and designers to minimise the risk of occurrence of the thaumasite form of sulfate attack in new construction.

Although the Group's findings are re-assuring, the Report stresses the need for the construction industry not to be complacent. It recommends that the industry, with appropriate support from Government, instigates a structured programme of research aimed at understanding the outstanding issues.

My Department is already taking steps to put in hand a programme of research in collaboration with the industry to take forward the Report's specific recommendations.

The BRE will be amending Digest 363, which gives advice to designers, to reflect the Report's recommendations. We have also asked the BRE to continue to monitor occurrences of thaumasite and the conditions under which these take place.

The Highways Agency is currently reviewing its interim guidance on thaumasite and will be issuing updated guidance shortly. It is completing its programme of investigations and repairs in Gloucestershire and Avon and is undertaking a phased limited programme of continued investigations in association with its planned bridge inspection programme.

I have also asked Professor Clark to review the Report's conclusions in a year's time with help from the experts at BRE and, in the light of the findings of further research and monitoring now being commissioned, to consider whether there may be a need to reconvene the Group.

Sky Glow

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to reduce sky glow from street lighting in rural areas. [67612]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on the 12 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *276*.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Theological Training (Ordinands)

37. **Mr. Hunter:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, if he will make a statement on the funding of theological training for ordinands. [65650]

Mr. Stuart Bell: There are 1,381 Anglican ordinands in training, whose costs are met primarily by money raised each year from the dioceses. The dioceses also provide financial support for the dependents of married ordinands in full-time training. Some support is also provided by the Church Times Train-a-Priest Fund, and other charities and trusts.

None of the training institutions receive direct support from public funds, although a small minority of ordinands attract LEA mandatory awards.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Pensions

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to paragraph 20, on page 4 of "Partnership in Pensions", Cm 4179, what proportion of people currently work throughout their working life. [65578]

Mr. Timms: The information is not available in the form requested.

The available information drawn from an analysis of National Insurance records shows that nearly 20 per cent. of the 800,000 people aged 54, who had computer records on the system in 1995–96, were employees throughout their working lives. This is based on a working life to 1995–96 of 34 years and men and women have been treated equally. (To qualify for the full rate of basic State pension a person has to pay or have credited National Insurance contributions for nine-tenths of their working life).

The Government's new State Second Pension will boost the second pension entitlement of those on low income, carers and long-term disabled people with broken work records. The combination of basic State pension and a second pension will cut the number of people who need to rely on income-related benefits in retirement.

Notes:

1. A cohort of 54 year old people was chosen as this is the only age group for which a full 1 per cent. sample is available at present.

2. Before 1975 a full working year has been taken as one in which a person paid Class 1 contributions for 50 weeks in that year; and, after 1975, contributions on earnings equivalent to 50 times the lower earnings limit. Periods of employment outside Class 1 employment have not been included. For example, self-employment and, prior to the raising of school leaving age in 1972, periods in employment under the age of 16 years.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what will be the incremental value to *(a)* the basic state pension and *(b)* the state second pension, of a year spent caring for a disabled person under his proposed pension reforms. [65577]

Mr. Timms: The incremental value of a year of caring will depend upon a number of factors, including the year in which care is given, the total number of years spent caring and the total number of years worked.

An individual who has a single year of caring upon introduction of the State Second Pension, who has 43 other qualifying years before retirement and no further years of caring, would receive £0.80 per week Basic State Pension and £0.90 per week State Second Pension more than if they had no years of caring.

Notes:

Figures are given in constant 1998 earnings terms.

Figures are rounded to the nearest £0.10.

Family Credit

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what are the target time scales for family credit appeals to be decided. [66823]

Angela Eagle: The Independent Tribunal Service (ITS) is responsible for the administration of Social Security Appeals. ITS is independent of the Department of Social Security and is not, therefore, subject to targets set by the Secretary of State.

However, his Honour Judge Harris, the ITS President, has an objective to clear all Social Security Appeals in 26 weeks from the date of lodgement to the date of hearing.

The Government are committed to speeding up the arrangements for handling appeals. The Social Security Act 1998 introduced measures to modernise and streamline the appeals process. One of the changes will be the launch of The Appeals Service, an executive agency responsible to the Secretary of State which will administer Social Security Appeals. Once The Appeals Service Agency has been launched, the Secretary of State will set demanding targets and will publish and report on the results.

Income Support

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will update his estimates, based on the Family Resources Survey 1996–97 of non-take-ups of income support by persons in each age, sex and marital status group, consistent with his answer of 19 October 1998, *Official Report*, columns *957–58*. [66876]

Angela Eagle: The information requested is not available. Following the discovery of the error in the published take-up statistics, work continues towards the publication of revised statistics relating to 1996–97. Publication is likely in the Spring.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what percentage of current CSA clients are in shared care arrangements above two nights per week or equivalent. [67140]

Angela Eagle: As at 31 August 1998, the latest date for which figures are available, around 5 per cent. of non-resident parents with a full maintenance assessment shared the care of one or more qualifying children for the equivalent of two nights a week and 2 per cent. shared care for longer periods.

Source:

CSA Quarterly Summary of Statistics August 1998.

Severe Disablement Allowance

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he plans to allow recipents of severe disablement allowance the right to have a home interview to satisfy the requirement to attend an interview for the Single Gateway to Work. [67367]

Angela Eagle: Home visits will be arranged in any cases where circumstances make it impractical for the claimant to attend the office.

Personal Adviser Interviews

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to allow a claimant the right *(a)* to object to attending a personal adviser interview under the Single Gateway to Work and *(b)* to appeal against a decision requiring him to attend such an interview. [67394]

Angela Eagle: Under the Single Work-focused Gateway pilots, payment of benefit to people of working age will be conditional upon attendance at an interview with a personal adviser. Claimants who are refused benefit or who are paid at a reduced rate as a result of their failure to take part in a personal interview without good reason will be able to take their case to an independent appeal tribunal.

Child Benefit

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many families in Doncaster Central, will receive the increase in child benefit, effective from April 1999. [66564]

Angela Eagle: The administration of Child Benefit is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency, Peter Mathison. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Ms Rosie Winterton, dated 21 January 1999:

I am replying to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many families in Doncaster Central will benefit from the increase in child benefit, effective from April 1999.

Unfortunately the information is not readily available to identify families, by region, who are receiving Child Benefit. These figures could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

I can however explain the new rates of Child Benefit from April 1999. They will be £14.40 for the eldest child and £9.60 for each subsequent child. The increase for the eldest child includes the extra £2.50 a week announced in the March Budget, plus uprating. This is an overall increase of £3.25 for a family with two children.

I am sorry on this occasion I could not be of more help but I am pleased to have the opportunity to comment.

Disability Benefits

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what performance targets have been set for the disability living allowance administration, Norcross, Blackpool, in respect of the length of time to reply to inquiries by hon. Members. [66673]

Mr. Bayley: The administration of Disability Living Allowance is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Ted Rowlands, dated 21 January 1999:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking what performance targets have been set for the Disability Living Allowance administration, Norcross, Blackpool, in respect of the length of time to reply to enquiries by honourable Members.

The target is to reply within 10 working days.

I hope this reply is helpful.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Judges' Interests

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to introduce a register of pecuniary and non-pecuniary interests for judges. [66951]

Mr. Hoon: There are no plans for the introduction of a general register of either pecuniary or non-pecuniary interests for judges. However, in my reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) on 18 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *325*, I referred to the steps already taken by the Lord Chancellor to ensure the proper disclosure of interests in any individual case by Members of the House of Lords in its judicial capacity.

Notaries

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has for abolishing the monopoly of notaries in London by the Worshipful Company of Scriveners; and if he will make a statement. [66977]

Mr. Hoon: The Department has obtained the views of interested parties on this issue. My noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor is currently considering whether the monopoly should be abolished. He hopes to be able to announce his conclusion shortly.

Local Deprivation Indicators

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department which measures of local deprivation his Department and its agencies use in considering allocation of funds to local projects. [66721]

Mr. Hoon: Thirteen Regional Legal Services Committees (RLSCs) have been established to advise the Legal Aid Board on the nature and extent of need for legal services throughout England and Wales and how need should be prioritised. Each RLSC is developing a Regional Strategy which identifies local need for legal services and makes recommendations for supply in relation to that need. The assessment of need is based on census data, the Index of Local Deprivation, the number of Income Support claimants, Housing Benefit claimants and Disability Living Allowance claimants.

Queen's Counsel

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to introduce post-appointment appraisals for Queen's Counsel. [66949]

Mr. Hoon: My noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor has no plans to introduce post-appointment appraisals for Queen's Counsel.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department how many *(a)* High Court judges and *(b)* Circuit judges appointed in each of the last five years had previously been Queen's Counsel. [66950]

Mr. Hoon: Of those judges appointed in the last five years, 37 High Court Judges and 30 Circuit Judges had previously been Queen's Counsel. The breakdown is as follows:

	High Court	*Circuit Bench*
1994	6	3
1995	12	3
1996	7	7
1997	6	10
1998	6	7

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department for each of the last five years, what was *(a)* the highest figure and *(b)* the average figure given as the gross fee income by applicants to be made Queen's Counsel who were (i) successful and (ii) unsuccessful. [66957]

Mr. Hoon: This information can only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what was the cost of the consultation procedure for the appointment of Queen's Counsel for each of the last five years; and what the total cost was of the staff employed in work related to the appointment of Queen's Counsel for each of the last five years. [66972]

Mr. Hoon: I list the departmental expenditure, excluding overheads, apportionable for considering applications for Queen's Counsel in each of the previous five financial years. I also list the costs incurred, excluding overheads, in relation to the appointment of Queen's Counsel for each of the previous five financial years. These are recovered by means of a fee charged for the grant of Queen's Counsel.

£

Year	*Departmental costs*	*Appointment costs*
1993–94	62,575	10,780
1994–95	69,824	9,940
1995–96	82,130	9,900
1996–97	80,168	10,200
1997–98	65,264	9,000

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will state, for each of the last five years *(a)* the average number and *(b)* the highest number of unsuccessful previous applications made by applicants to be made Queen's Counsel. [66971]

Mr. Hoon: The average of unsuccessful previous applications made by applicants for Queen's Counsel in 1998 was 2.5. The highest number of unsuccessful previous applications by an applicant for Queen's Counsel in 1998 was 25. In respect of earlier years the information requested is not available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to make the system of appointment of Queen's Counsel more transparent. [66975]

Mr. Hoon: My noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor has recently made the system more transparent. This year he is consulting more of the legal community than before about the suitability of candidates. Applications for silk are invited in a notice published in the national press. The policies, procedures and criteria that he applies to these appointments are published each year in a guide for applicants. The Guide for Applicants can be found on the Lord Chancellor's Department's website. The Lord Chancellor continually reviews the system with a view to making it even more transparent.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department (1) what plans he has to recover *(a)* the cost of the Queen's Counsel consultation procedure and *(b)* the related departmental staff costs from applicants; [66973]

(2) what plans he has *(a)* to introduce an application fee for appointment to Queen's Counsel, *(b)* to review the £150 fee paid by successful applicants only and *(c)* to introduce an annual Queen's Counsel renewal fee. [66974]

Mr. Hoon: My noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor has no current plans to recover the departmental expenditure apportionable to the procedure for considering applications for Queen's Counsel by means of an application fee. He will, however, continue to review the situation. The £150 fee paid by successful applicants is currently under review. My noble

and learned Friend has no plans to introduce an annual Queen's Counsel renewal fee. The award of Queen's Counsel is by letters patent and is not subject to annual renewal.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department for each of the last five years, what was *(a)* the total number of applications to be made Queen's Counsel, *(b)* the number of successful applicants and *(c)* of *(a)* and *(b)*, how many were (i) women, (ii) from ethnic minorities, (iii) below the age of 38, (iv) over the age of 50 and (v) solicitors. [66952]

Mr. Hoon: The information is as follows:

	1994	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
Total number of applicants	539	492	488	500	511
Number of successful applicants	77	71	66	68	60
Number of female applicants	43	42	40	41	46
Number of successful female applicants	9	8	4	5	10
Number of applicants from an ethnic minority background	11	12	14	12	18
Number of successful ethnic minority background applicants	1	1	1	1	4
Number of solicitor applicants	—	—	5	6	7
Number of successful solicitor applicants	—	—	0	2	1
Number of applicants under 38	—	—	—	—	3
Number of successful applicants under 38	—	—	—	—	0
Number of applicants over 50	—	—	—	—	95
Number of successful applicants over 50	—	—	—	—	3

Solicitors, provided they met the eligibility criteria, have been able to apply since 1996.

With regard to applicants under 38 and over 50 the information requested prior to 1998 is not available save at disproportionate cost.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Commercial Lobbyists

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what rules or guidance her Department has to govern the *(a)* formal and *(b)* informal interaction between her civil servants and commercial lobbyists. [66207]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I refer my hon. Friend to an answer given by the Prime Minister on 27 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *4*, to my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice).

Firemen's Pensions

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many appeals have been heard against the opinion of the medical practitioner of the Fire Authority for Northern Ireland under Article 61 of the Firemen's Pension Scheme Order (Northern Ireland) 1973 in each of the last five years in respect of *(a)* full-time firemen and *(b)* retained firemen; and in each year how many of the appeals found in favour of the firemen in each of the two categories. [66443]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Details of appeals to the opinion of the medical practitioner as requested for the last 5 years are shown in the table.

	Number of appeals heard		*Number of appeals upheld*		*Number of appeals dismissed*	
Year	*Retained*	*Wholetime*	*Retained*	*Wholetime*	*Retained*	*Wholetime*
1994	8	5	3	3	5	2
1995	5	2	2	2	3	—
1996	2	3	1	3	1	—
1997	6	5	4	3	2	2
1998	5	3	4	2	1	1

The hon. Member should note that 44 cases in total were heard, 27 of which were upheld and 17 dismissed.

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many appeals under article 62 of the Firemen's Pension Scheme Order (Northern Ireland) 1973 have been heard in each of the last five years in respect of *(a)* full-time firemen and *(b)* retained firemen; and in how many cases the appeal was decided in favour of the fireman. [66442]

Mr. Paul Murphy: One appeal under article 62 of the Fireman Pension Scheme Order (NI) 1973 has been heard in the last 5 years (in 1994).

This case was in respect of a retained firefighter and the appeal was decided in the appellant's favour.

NIACRO

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what sums from the phase two programme administered by the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders have been expended in each of the last four years in respect of persons who have had to leave Northern Ireland because of threats from terrorist organisations; and how many of these departures were the result of pressure from *(a)* Loyalist and *(b)* Republican terrorist organisations. [66568]

Mr. Ingram: NIACRO run the Base 2 project which was established in 1990. The project aims to prevent individuals from being the victims of paramilitary punishment attacks. The services provided by the project are used by a number of statutory and voluntary agencies including Social Services, Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE), Families Against Intimidation and Terror (FAIT) and previously by the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI). Base 2 also receive a large number of self referrals.

Overall levels of funding (by financial year)

	1995–96	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99 (to date)*
Making Belfast Work (MBW)	80,000	—	—	—
Probation Board for NI (PBNI)	—	82,080	82,080	—
Social Services Inspectorate	11,851	12,768	—	—
Trusts	10,000	5,500	37,580	39,500
Total	101,851	100,348	119,660	39,500

The project does not receive funding from Central Government.

The funds identified relate to the totality of the Base 2 activities and it is not possible to extract financial information that relates specifically to the cost of removing those under threat from Northern Ireland.

Source of threat [1]

	1995	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
Republican	129	238	329	337
Loyalist	90	155	218	292
Unknown	5	—	16	17

[1] Figures are detailed by calendar year

The table details the total numbers of people dealt with based on the origin of the threat against them.

Final outcome—left country[1]

Year	*Number*
1995	55
1996	106
1997	81

Final outcome—left country[1]

Year	*Number*
1998	88

[1] Figures are detailed by calendar year

The table relates to those people who were assisted to leave the country.

I have also arranged for a copy of the Base 2 Annual Report for 1997 to be placed in the Library.

Irish Presidential Visits

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list the visits made to Northern Ireland in 1998 by the President of the Irish Republic and indicate *(a)* which were of a private nature and *(b)* which were official, showing in the latter case the (i) purpose of the visit and (ii) who issued the invitation. [66440]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The President of the Republic of Ireland paid eight visits to Northern Ireland during 1998. Details are as follows:

Date	*Visits*
21 January	Inter-denominational Service at St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Cathedral, Armagh.
5–8 April	Convent of Mercy School, Rostrevor; Institute of Directors' Annual Dinner; Hillsborough Castle; Flax Trust; Wave Trauma Centre; Cornerstone Community Centre; Launch of EU Peace and Reconciliation Directive (PROTEUS), Belfast; St. Michael's Grammar School, Lurgan; St. Mark's High School, Arrenpoint.
8–10 May	Annual Dinner of St. Mary's Christian Brothers' School, Belfast.
16 August	Omagh in aftermath of bomb.
22 August	Inter-denominational Service, Omagh; Royal Victoria Hospital Belfast.
21–22 October	St. Joseph's High School; Clonalig Primary School, St. Brigid's Primary School, Crossmaglen; Creggan Parent and Toddler Association; Dove House Community; Rural Area Partnership in Derry; Well Woman Centre; Talking Hands, Londonderry, International Fund for Ireland projects in Brookeborough and Lisnaskea.
17 November	St. Oliver Plunkett's School, Forkhill, Bunscoil an luir, Newry, New Start Millennium Awards, Ashton Centre, Institute for Counselling and Personal Development, Amnesty International, Queen's University, St. Louise' School Concert, Belfast.
16–17 December	Graduation Ceremony, Queen's University; Mater Hospital, Belfast, Whiteabbey Primary School; Thornfield Trust Speech Disability Unit, Jordanstown.

Note:
All of the visits were private working visits.

Irish Language

Mr. Hesford: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on developments in promoting the Irish language. [65305]

Mr. McFall: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) on 20 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns 893–95.

Cleft Palate

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many infants and children are waiting for operations to deal with cleft palate. [67017]

Mr. McFall: Information on the waiting list of children requiring surgery for Cleft Lip and Palate at the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children is set out in the table:

Table 1: Waiting list at 21 January 1999

	Number
First surgery[1]	
Cleft palates	11
Cleft lip and palates	4
Pharynngo plasty	5
Second surgery	
Nasal adjustments	17
Lip revisions	12

[1] It is generally accepted that those in the "first surgery" grouping should have their procedure carried out within 3 Month timescale

Paramilitary Violence

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list for the weeks ending *(a)* 5 December and *(b)* 12 December the number of punishment (i) beatings and (ii) shootings which took place in Northern Ireland; and how many in each category were committed by (i) Loyalists and (ii) Republicans. [64196]

Mr. Ingram: The table shows the number of casualties as a result of paramilitary style attacks for the period 29 November to 12 December.

	29 November to 5 December	*6 December to 12 December*	*Totals*
Shootings			
By Loyalist	1	0	1
By Republican	2	1	3
Assaults			
By Loyalist	1	2	3
By Republican	1	0	1

WALES

NHS (Resources)

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what extra resources he has provided for the NHS since 1 May 1997; and if he will make a statement. [66031]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Since May 1997, the following additional resources of £163 million has been allocated to NHS Wales as follows:

£600,000 in May 1997 for Breast Cancer;

£2.5 million in May 1997 for Primary Care;

£9.5 million in October 1997 to alleviate winter pressures and emergencies;

£113 million cash increase for 1998–99 including £60.2 million new money from the 1997 Budget and £1.3 million from Welsh Office Block;

£25.1 million in March 1998 to bring inpatient waiting lists down; and,

£12.5 million in November 1998 to alleviate winter pressures and emergencies.

In July 1998, following the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review, an additional £175, £345 and £510 million—a total of over £1 billion—was announced to be available for health for the 3 years from April 1999.

Nurses

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many nurses there were in *(a)* 1980 and *(b)* 1990; and if he will make a statement. [66035]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The available information, which relates to all staff in the nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff group, is as follows:

Nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff, Wales[1]

Year	*Number*
1980	20,778
1990	25,017

[1] Whole-time equivalent numbers in post at 30 September excluding pre-registration learners

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) how many whole-time equivalent nurses were employed in Wales on 30 April 1997; [66497]

(2) how many whole-time equivalent nurses are currently employed in Wales. [66498]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Information on the whole-time equivalent number of staff in the nursing, midwifery and health visiting group is collected centrally as at the last day of each quarter. The available information is given in the following table.

Nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff, Wales

Date	*Number*
31 March 1997	23,513
30 September 1998	23,691

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what steps he is taking to encourage more people to enter the nursing profession. [66373]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: In 1998 there were over 8,000 applications for around 1,000 student places for pre-registration nursing and midwifery education in Wales. While this suggests that there is not a recruitment problem to nurse training in Wales, action is being taken to ensure that this situation continues. This includes ensuring that

entry to pre-registration programmes remains as wide as possible; offering a range of programmes from diploma to undergraduate level all of which lead to registration; and encouraging the development of recruitment initiatives by individual education providers including formal links with local schools and colleges.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on nursing staff recruitment in the NHS in Wales. [66164]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Information received from workforce planning data and the nurse executive survey in 1998 showed that there were around 500 funded vacancies for qualified nurses in the NHS in Wales. About 600 students completed their training and qualified in 1998 to meet this need. Recruitment difficulties are limited to a small number of individual Trusts but the year on year increases in training numbers should help to alleviate such problems.

Hospital Beds

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many hospital beds there were in *(a)* 1979 and *(b)* 1991; and if he will make a statement. [66033]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The information requested is as follows:

In 1979 the average daily availability of NHS beds in Wales was 23,456. By 1991–92 this had fallen to 18,640.

Best Value

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what initiatives he has taken to promote best value in local government; and if he will make a statement. [66438]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: In July 1997 a joint Welsh Office and Welsh Local Government Association Project Group was established to develop and promote best value in Wales. This group also includes representatives from the TUC, CBI, Audit Commission, District Audit Service and the voluntary sector.

The group has commissioned a 2 year evaluation study to test the best value policy framework. All 22 authorities, a combined fire authority and a police authority are now participating in this study which is being independently assessed by the Cardiff Business School. The work being done as part of the study will help the Assembly make orders and draw up guidance on how best value will operate in Wales.

Each month this group meets the best value Project Managers from the study authorities to monitor progress and discuss policy issues arising from the study.

The group has recently started a best value monthly newsletter. I enclose a copy for my hon. Friend to see. It is also currently negotiating the establishment of a best value website.

In addition to this work, I am undertaking a series of visits to local authorities to promote best value and discuss progress with the study.

My first visit was to Flintshire on 19 January. I also addressed a best value conference at a Neath Port Talbot on 15 January and will be speaking at another best value conference organised by the Audit Commission on 23 March.

Welsh Development Agency

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is the *(a)* current and *(b)* proposed budget of each division in Wales of the Welsh Development Agency. [66439]

Mr. Hain: The budget for individual Divisions of the Welsh Development Agency is an operational matter for the Agency and I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend directly. I will arrange for a copy of the Agency's letter to be placed in the Library of the House.

Council House Sales (Flintshire)

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate he has made of the amount of money realised from sales of council houses by Flintshire County Council. [66417]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Flintshire County Council has been in existence since 1 April 1996. Information on Flintshire's receipts from the sale of council houses is as follows:

Year	*£ million*
1996–97	1.0
1997–98	[1]1.6
1998–99	[2]1.6

[1] Provisional outturn
[2] Local authority forecast

Crime and Disorder Act 1998

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on progress in the co-operation between Flintshire County Council and the North Wales Police Authority following the enactment of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. [66420]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The Flintshire Community Safety Executive, consisting of a variety of agencies from the local area including Flintshire County Council and the North Wales Police Authority, has been set up in order to meet the requirements of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. The Executive which has now met on three occasions has set out a programme of work and initial targets for the completion of a crime audit and a crime and disorder reduction strategy in line with the requirements of the Act. The crime audit was produced by a team of staff from various agencies and was published in November 1998. There has been widespread consultation on the crime audit. At the latest meeting of the Executive on 18 January 1999 the partnership agreed a draft crime and disorder reduction strategy which will be the subject of discussion at a Public Consultation Meeting to be held in mid-March in Flint.

Traffic Calming

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on his policy on traffic calming. [66412]

Mr. Hain: The Government have conducted trials across the United Kingdom to establish the most effective means of reducing traffic speeds and to reduce the risk of accidents caused by inappropriate driving behaviour. Our policy on trunk roads is to target sites with poor accident

records and/or excessive vehicular speeds for treatment. On some urban and residential roads research has shown that 20 mph is a realistic, sensible and effective level at which to set speed limits. When properly enforced, dramatic casualty reductions can be achieved. The Government have decided to amend the legislation to free local authorities from the requirement to seek the consent of the Secretary of State to introduce 20 mph zones.

Drug Abuse

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what progress he is making in his strategy to combat drugs abuse in (i) Wales and (ii) Flintshire; and if he will make a statement. [66437]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The Welsh substance misuse strategy 'Forward Together' was launched in 1996. As part of this 5-year strategy, Drug and Alcohol Action Teams (DAATs) have been established in each of the five health authority areas in Wales, including North Wales. Each DAAT has reviewed the extent of the substance misuse problems in its area and has developed a local strategy to tackle them. 'Forward Together', and the subsequent formation of the Flintshire Local Advisory Team, has led to a marked increased in the joint delivery of services and a better co-ordination of activity across Flintshire with significant progress against a number of the strategy's objectives.

'Forward Together' is currently being reviewed in the light of the new UK Anti-Drugs strategy 'Tackling Drugs to Build a Better Britain'.

Midwives

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the *(a)* current situation and *(b)* forecast position in 12 months, with regard to midwife recruitment. [66183]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Staff recruitment remains a service issue. However, no major recruitment difficulties were identified in 1998 workforce planning round for midwives. The predicted demand from NHS Trusts in Wales for newly qualified midwives in 1999–2000 is 70. Training numbers across Wales will meet this demand. Information for 2000–01 will be available, following the outcome of the workforce planning exercise, in May 1999.

School Management

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to allow private companies to take over the running of schools in Wales. [66182]

Mr. Hain: None. The running of schools is a matter for their governing bodies. Local education authorities (LEAs) have powers to intervene if they have serious concerns about a school; or if governors do not address failure or serious weakness identified in an inspection carried out under section 10 of the School Inspections Act 1996.

The Secretary of State in turn can intervene if an LEA is failing to perform its functions. I have no evidence that any LEA in Wales is failing in its responsibilities towards schools where problems have been identified which would justify intervention.

Road Safety

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what initiatives he is taking to ensure improved road safety in the vicinity of schools in Queensferry, Shotton and Connah's Quay; and if he will make a statement. [66411]

Mr. Hain: I recently announced that I have allocated £39,000 to Flintshire County Council, for 1999–2000, under the Safe Routes to School Initiative. This will help the local authority to improve road safety in the vicinity of eleven primary and two secondary schools in the Connah's Quay, Shotton and Queensferry areas.

EU Structural Funds

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) what discussions he has had with the Treasury on EU Structural Fund match funding commitments in Wales; and what was the outcome of these discussions; [66472]

(2) how much money has been identified by his Department to meet EU Structural Fund match funding commitments for 1999 to 2002; [66473]

(3) how much money has been allocated in each Welsh Office department to meet EU Structural Fund match funding commitments in 1999 to 2002; [66474]

(4) if EU Structural Fund match funding in Wales will be met from within the Barnett Formula Settlement. [66475]

Mr. Michael: I refer the hon. Member to the discussion held at the Welsh Affairs Select Committee on Tuesday, 19 January. As I reported then, the European Commission is still considering the new Structural Fund arrangements. Once these have been confirmed, the Government will review forecasts of European receipts contained in its overall expenditure plans. The Government will then consider the distribution of these for wider programmes and the way in which to meet the relevant requirements. I shall ensure that the interests of Wales are taken into account at each stage.

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list for each of the last 10 years the amounts of *(a)* money Wales received from the EU through Structural Funds and *(b)* match funding money which the Welsh Office made available for Structural Fund projects; and what percentage of the potential money available was drawn down in Wales from EU Structural Funds in each year. [67355]

Mr. Hain: I will write to the hon. Member as soon as possible and place a copy of my reply in the Library of the House.

House Condition Survey

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he plans to publish the 1997 Welsh House Condition Survey. [67282]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Current plans are to issue initial results from the 1997–98 Welsh House Condition Survey in April 1999 and a more detailed publication by the summer.

Sixth Forms

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to implement proposals to abolish sixth forms in secondary schools. [67147]

Mr. Hain: There are no plans to abolish schools sixth forms in secondary schools. On the contrary in those schools with sixth forms, we are looking to increase pupil choice and opportunities.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to implement proposals to set up a new NDPB to fund and administer sixth forms. [67145]

Mr. Michael: There are no plans to set up and administer a new body to fund and administer sixth forms in Wales.

Education and Training Action Group will produce a final document following consultation covering a range of proposals which will principally be for consideration by the National Assembly.

Education and Training

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what consultations he has had with teaching unions regarding the proposals in the report, "An Education and Training Action Plan for Wales". [67148]

Mr. Hain: The Group's draft Action Plan is currently the subject of wide public consultation, including the teaching unions.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what consultations he has had with head teachers of secondary schools regarding the report, "An Education and Training Action Plan for Wales". [67146]

Mr. Hain: The Education and Training Action Group was established in November 1997.

The Group's draft Action Plan is currently the subject of wide public consultation which has included all secondary schools in Wales. A conference specifically for the secondary schools' head teachers was held on 19 January.

Porthmadog Hospital

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will give approval for the project proposed by the North Wales Health Authority to build a new community hospital at Porthmadog. [67137]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The proposal to build a new community hospital at Porthmadog will be considered along with all other priorities for 1999–2000.

A487

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he will announce the start for work on constructing the Llanllyfni, Penygroes and Groeslon bypass on the A487 trunk road. [67055]

Mr. Hain: We are still considering the resource implications of commencing work on this scheme. An announcement will be made shortly.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

World Athletics Championships (2003)

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the United Kingdom's bid to host the 2003 World Athletics Championships at Wembley. [66618]

Mr. Banks: The Government are committed to attracting major sporting events to this country and supporting bids which are of genuine high quality and are economically viable. The bid to hold the 2003 World Athletics Championship is being made by the London 2003 Consortium and was given full Government support when it was presented to the IAAF in November. The IAAF will announce the result of the bidding process in April 1999.

Lottery Funding (ICT)

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will set out the basis on which it was decided that National Lottery funding for ICT for teachers should not be made available to *(a)* the independent sector, *(b)* special schools, *(c)* assistant teachers and *(d)* teachers on maternity leave. [65941]

Mr. Banks *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The basis on which the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) funds the ICT initiative for teachers was set out in their Policy Directions, copies of which are available in the Libraries of both Houses.

National Lottery funding for ICT training for teachers is available for teachers of maintained special schools; for teachers on maternity leave, if they are currently registered with a school; and for assistant teachers, as opposed to teacher assistants who are not normally teachers, if they are registered at a school. Independent schools and teachers assistants are not funded under this initiative because of the need to maintain a viable programme within the limited Lottery money available. However, there is nothing to prevent independent schools from using their own resources to take advantage of available training once the Lottery funded scheme is in place.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when it was decided that vouchers for ICT training for teachers in schools funded by the National Lottery should be paid to local education authorities and not headteachers. [65942]

Mr. Banks *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The process by which the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) will fund ICT training for teachers was determined by the NOF Board, which will calculate training entitlements for individual schools across the United Kingdom.

Local education authorities in Wales, education authorities in Scotland, and education and library boards in Northern Ireland will have a delegated role in distributing entitlements to schools on behalf of NOF. In England, schools will be responsible for applying for their training entitlements.

Copies of the Policy Directions for NOF's ICT initiative for teachers are available in the Libraries of the House.

Tourism (North West)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will estimate the annual amount of financial support provided by his Department for tourism in the North-west in each of the last five years. [66897]

Janet Anderson: The North-west, like all parts of England, benefits from the work of the British Tourist Authority and of the English Tourist Board. For 1998–99, the BTA has a grant of £35 million and the ETB a grant of £9.7 million.

A significant part of the grant to the ETB is passed on to the ten regional tourist boards. ETB funding to the North-west Tourist Board over the last five years has been as follows:

	£
1998–99	292,000
1997–98	292,619
1996–97	299,274
1995–96	414,000
1994–95	400,199

Source:
English Tourist Board

New support structures announced on 14 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 588, as part of the results of the DCMS Departmental Spending Review, will ensure that in future more effective use is made of public spending on tourism in England, with a greater proportion going to the regions.

In addition, tourism in the North-west has benefited, both directly and indirectly, from National Lottery funding (nearly £450 million in total has gone to the region), and from the support under the European Regional Development Fund.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assistance his Department is providing to ensure that beaches in the North West are brought up to Blue Flag standard. [66928]

Janet Anderson: My Department does not provide assistance specifically for the purpose of raising the quality of beaches. However, my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment has asked the Environment Agency and North West Water to work closely together to sort out the remaining problems and last year he approved additional expenditure to bring improvements to the Fylde Coast bathing waters. Options for further investment to achieve water quality required for Blue Flags are being considered as part of the current review of water company prices.

Channel 5

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans exist to increase the broadcasting coverage of Channel 5 to areas that currently are unable to receive transmissions, with particular reference to Worcester. [67029]

Janet Anderson: The Independent Television Commission (ITC) is responsible for monitoring the terms of the Channel 5 licence, which include issues regarding reception or availability of their services. Worcester is served primarily by the Malvern relay which does not carry Channel 5. I understand that there are currently no plans to install Channel 5 analogue at Malvern. However, Malvern, is one of the 81 transmitter sites which comprise the launch phase of digital terrestrial television which will offer Channel 5. Digital terrestrial television broadcasts from Malvern are expected to begin in the summer of this year. Channel 5 has also enhanced its existing coverage by offering its service free-to-air on cable and satellite.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Mr. Anthony Stewart

Mr. Brake: To ask the Attorney-General if he will make a statement on the decision not to prosecute Asda or its staff following the death of Mr. Anthony Robert Stewart. [66848]

The Attorney-General: On 16 October 1997 Mr. Anthony Robert Stewart died following an incident in the restaurant at Asda Superstore in Wallington. Mr. Stewart had been restrained by members of Asda staff.

The pathologist concluded that the cause of death was asphyxiation due to the position in which Mr. Stewart had been restrained: postural asphyxiation.

The police investigated the incident and the members of staff were interviewed under caution. The police sent a file of evidence to the Crown Prosecution Service.

As with all cases which involve the unexpected death of persons, effectively in custody, the papers received the most careful scrutiny and consideration to determine whether a criminal offence may have been committed. The reviewing Crown Prosecutor considered possible offences of assault and manslaughter against the individuals and corporate manslaughter against Asda. In addition, the Crown Prosecutor obtained the advice of Senior Treasury Counsel.

The Crown Prosecution Service concluded that there was insufficient evidence for a realistic prospect of conviction of a criminal offence by any one of the individuals involved or by the company, arising out of Mr. Stewart's tragic death.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Police (Early Retirement)

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what changes have been *(a)* considered and rejected and *(b)* made since the publication of the Home Affairs Committee First report of Session 1997–98 on police disciplinary and complaints procedures (HC 894) into the ability of police officers to avoid disciplinary procedures by taking retirement. [66648]

Mr. Boateng: The Home Affairs Committee's Inquiry Report into police disciplinary and complaints procedures made no recommendations about police officers taking retirement to avoid disciplinary proceedings. However, it expressed concerns about officers who go sick, which effectively halts disciplinary proceedings, and recommended that the regulations should be changed to enable chief officers to complete

hearings in the absence of an accused officer (recommendation 33). The Government accepted this recommendation, which had in fact already been agreed for new procedures then in draft form. New police misconduct procedures, which incorporate this and a number of other important changes, will come into force on 1 April 1999.

The present police regulations already provide that, where police officers are suspended in connection with disciplinary proceedings, retirement cannot take place. Police authorities and forces will seek to complete any outstanding disciplinary proceedings before retirement but this is sometimes not possible in the time remaining. Also, under the police pensions regulations, police authorities have discretion to decide against requiring an officer to retire on the grounds of ill health and may, therefore, withhold medical retirement in a case where there are outstanding disciplinary proceedings.

Mr. Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will review the procedures under which Metropolitan Police officers are able to take early retirement to avoid facing disciplinary action that is outstanding at the time of their retirement. [66478]

Mr. Straw: Police officers throughout England and Wales up to and including the rank of superintendent may retire either after 30 years' service with a full pension being paid, or after 25 years' service with a reduced pension payable when they reach age 50, provided they give one month's notice. They may leave without an immediate pension before they have served for 25 years, for instance where they have found different employment.

Police authorities and forces aim to complete any outstanding disciplinary proceedings before retirement but this is sometimes not possible in the time remaining. In those disciplinary cases in which police officers are already suspended, retirement cannot take place. Under the Police Pensions Regulations, police authorities have discretion to decide against requiring an officer to retire on the grounds of ill health and may, therefore, withhold medical retirement in a case where there are outstanding disciplinary proceedings. The implications of these procedures for police discipline are matters which we keep constantly under review with regard to all forces, to identify the potential for improved performance in this aspect.

I have made clear that I will, of course, consider any relevant recommendations which arise from the Inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence.

Torture

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 9 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *210*, what guidance has been given to state parties by the UN Committee on Torture on appropriate responses to its recommendations; what measures he will take to act upon its recommendations prior to the deadline for the fourth UK Periodic report in 2002; and what steps he has taken to secure the agreement of other Ministerial departments to respond to the recommendations of the UN Committee. [66084]

Mr. Boateng *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* The United Nations Committee against Torture has issued no specific guidance to state parties. However, the United Nations has published guidance on the reporting requirements of the six main human rights treaties in its "Manual on Human Rights Reporting". This requires a periodic report to contain information on any action taken as a result of conclusions and recommendations reached by the Committee.

The Government have taken note of the Committee against torture's recommendations made after the oral hearing on 16 November 1998. All interested Departments have been made aware of its recommendations, and will give them due consideration. The Government wrote to the Committee on 25 November about its third recommendation relating to section 134 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988. I am sending a copy of that letter to my hon. Friend and placing a copy in the Library. The United Kingdom's Fourth Periodic Report to the Committee will be prepared in consultation with all interested Departments, as has been the case with earlier reports.

Cycling on Pavements

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he plans to introduce regulations permitting fixed penalties for the offence of cycling on pavements. [66849]

Mr. Boateng: The Order to introduce a fixed penalty for the offence of cycling on the pavement is being drafted and will be laid as soon as possible.

DNA Database

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to the letter of 21 July (FL/98 333/1039/3 PO 10689/98) to the hon. Member for Linlithgow, what progress has been made in the joint research programme between the Forensic Science Service and the police on the development of the national DNA data-base. [65398]

Mr. Boateng *[holding answer 20 January 1999]:* The development of the National DNA database is currently being reviewed by the Association of Chief Police Officers and the Forensic Science Service (FSS) on the basis of its performance to date, the elimination of the analysis backlog in the spring, and the emerging results from joint projects between the FSS and individual police forces. I will write to my hon. Friend when the results are available.

On wider issues of the usefulness of DNA analysis which was also covered by the letter of 18 June 1998, the joint research programme has assessed the value of an alternative and more sensitive method of DNA analysis known as Mitochondrial DNA. This can be used to analyse human material such as hair shafts, faeces and fingernails, which cannot be analysed using conventional DNA methods. This has proved valuable in casework. Other research to identify and use commonplace characteristics is on-going.

Firearms (Compensation)

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to receive the National Audit Office study into the surrender of handguns and compensation schemes. [66817]

Mr. Boateng: The arrangements for the submission of National Audit Office reports are a matter for the Comptroller and Auditor General, but I understand that his report on the handgun surrender and compensation schemes is likely to be submitted soon, following the final stages of clearance with the Departmental Accounting Officer which are currently in hand.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list how each new appointee to the Firearms Consultative Committee fulfils the criteria provided by section 22 of the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1988. [66816]

Mr. Boateng: I am satisfied that all new appointees to the Firearms Consultative Committee appear to have knowledge and experience—either direct or indirect—of some or all of the matters set out in section 22(1) of the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1988.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the members of the Firearms Consultative Committee whom he has nominated in accordance with the provisions of the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1988 together with the reasons for which they were appointed. [66936]

Mr. Boateng: The following persons have been appointed to the Firearms Consultative Committee:

Appointees	
The Earl of Shrewsbury and Waterford	Chairman—Farmer and game shooter
Graham Bennet	Assistant Chief Constable (Designate), Fife Constabulary
Tony Burden	Chief Constable, South Wales Police
Brian Carter	Director of Gun Trade Association and firearms dealer
Robin Cooper	Head of Firearms Policy Team, Her Majesty's Customs and Excise
Jim Duncan	Superintendent, Grampian Police
Sandy Ewing	Firearms consultant to National Rifle Association
William Harriman	Head of Firearms, British Association of Shooting and Conservation
Tony Hill	Engineer, member of Gun Control Network
John Hoare	Secretary and Chief Executive of National Small-Bore Rifle Association
Barry Hughes	Barrister. Assistant Chief Crown Prosecutor
Gill Marshall-Andrews	Chair of the Gun Control Network
David McCrone	Assistant Chief Constable, Greater Manchester Police
David Penn	Curator of the Exhibits and Firearms, Imperial War Museum
Bob Pitcher	Proof Master of the London Proof House
Stephen Smith	Head of Technical Services, National Farmers Union
Ian Snedden	Head of Police Department, Scottish Office
Tom Warlow	Forensic Scientist and ballistics expert
Graham Widdecombe	Head of Firearms and Explosives Section, Home Office
James Winnington	Farmer and magistrate

In making these appointments, the Secretary of State was satisfied that all members appeared to have knowledge and experience—either direct or indirect—of one or more of the matters set out in section 22(1) of the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1988.

National Family and Parenting Institute

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what stage he has reached in the establishment of the National Family and Parenting Institute; [66736]

(2) what requirements there will be for the National Family and Parenting Institute to have regard to different social, ethnic, religious, moral and spiritual values; [66738]

(3) what will be the arrangements for the selection and appointment of trustees for the National Family and Parenting Institute. [66737]

Mr. Boateng: I hope to make an announcement on the Chair of the Board of Trustees for the National Family and Parenting Institute before April 1999.

I am being advised on the appointment of the Board of Trustees by a small group of representatives from key family support charities and others from the voluntary sector and professional bodies. The Trustee body will be broadly based, consistent with the suggestion of the reference group that it should not be too unwieldy. The Government will not seek the power to appoint future trustees of the National Family and Parenting Institute, which will be an independent charity.

In applying for Government funding to take forward its work programme, the Institute's trustees will need to adhere to the grant conditions attached to the Family Support Grant which require that applicants must include a strategy to ensure that their services reach, are relevant to, and get taken up by black and ethnic minority organisations.

Brian Parsons

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will call for a report from the Chief Constable of Hampshire as to the cost of the investigation into the handling by the Devon and Cornwall Police of the Brian Parsons case. [66976]

Mr. Boateng: I understand that the cost of the investigation to date, excluding the salary costs of the officers on the inquiry, is £84,000. This is being borne by the Devon and Cornwall Constabulary.

Local Deprivation Indicators

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which measures of local deprivation his Department and its agencies use in considering allocation of funds to local projects. [66719]

Mr. Boateng: The Home Office funds a number of local projects. In considering the allocation of funds, account is taken of whether the project meets the criteria for the individual scheme and the aims, objectives and targets in the Public Service Agreement for the Home Office set out in the White Paper "Public Services for the Future: Modernisation, Reform and Accountability" (cm 4181).

Criminal Records Bureau

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make grants to youth organisations to match in full the fee required by the Criminal Records Bureau for checks on adult volunteers. [66979]

Mr. Boateng: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I have him on 18 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *337*.

Speed Cameras

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will take steps to ensure that revenue from fines imposed for speeding are made available to fund speed limit enforcement measures; [66735]

(2) what additional funds is he planning to make available for the funding of speed limit enforcement cameras. [66711]

Mr. Boateng: Enforcement of road traffic law is an operational matter for chief officers of police and they decide how to allocate their funding. We do not provide policing funds specifically designated for speed enforcement cameras and there are no plans to do so under current arrangements. But on 9 December, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury announced criteria under which fine income might be used to finance specific projects. Additional funding for speed enforcement camera is being considered under those criteria.

Deportation Orders

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many deportation orders were made between 1 June 1997 and 31 May 1998; and how many have not yet been executed. [67345]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Between 1 June 1997 and 31 May 1998, 1,090 deportation orders were made, of which around 650 have yet to be given effect.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many of the deportation orders made between 1 June and 30 November 1998 were in respect of people who were in custody. [67347]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I regret that information relating to the number of persons who were in custody when deportation orders were made against them between 1 June and 30 November 1998 could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people were deported between 1 June 1997 and 31 May 1998; and of these how many were on the strength of deportation orders made before 1 June 1997. [67346]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Between 1 June 1997 and 31 May 1998, some 720 persons were removed as a result of the enforcement of a deportation order. Around 60 per cent. of those persons were removed on the strength of deportation orders made before 1 June 1997.

An additional 1,230 persons were removed or departed voluntarily during the same period following the initiation of deportation action against them but without a deportation order being made.

Animal Experiments

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his estimate of the cost of a Royal Commission of Inquiry into animal experiments. [67339]

Mr. George Howarth: We estimate that such a Royal Commission would cost at least £800,000 per annum and that it would need to sit for between two and three years, although both the cost and duration of such a Commission would depend on the terms of reference and other factors which are difficult to assess and quantify.

Special Constables

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what initiatives he has taken to promote the recruitment of special constables among members of the ethnic minority communities. [66935]

Mr. Boateng: As part of Specials Week, a week in January to highlight the Special Constabulary and assist police forces with their campaigns to recruit more special constables, I visited events in four force areas specifically targeting ethnic communities.

Cleveland Police held an open day at the Racial Equality Council offices in Middlesbrough on 11 January during which I launched Specials Week. In Bradford, West Yorkshire ethnic minority special constables are involved in a scheme in which they work in their own communities promoting community safety initiatives and recruitment to the Special Constabulary.

The 50 members of the West Midlands Police Authority, many of whom are from ethnic minority communities, have agreed to take part in a programme to each recruit a person from their community to the Special Constabulary. Leicestershire Constabulary invited representatives from local religious, ethnic and business groups to an event at a community centre in Leicester to recognise the work of special constables within the ethnic communities.

All these forces, and others with high ethnic minority populations, are developing good working relationships with the ethnic communities through the work of the regular force and the contribution of special constables.

In addition, last November the Home Office invited police forces to staff a stand at the Mega Mela exhibition at the Birmingham NEC, an event in celebration of the Asian culture. Asian officers, including special constables, were able to talk to visitors about what it is like to work for the police and encourage applicants to the service.

A copy of a recruitment leaflet produced for the event has been placed in the Library.

Jeff and Jenny Bramley

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the cost to public funds of the police appeal for Jeff and Jenny Bramley. [66934]

Mr. Boateng: I understand from the Chief Constable that the total estimated cost to the Cambridgeshire Constabulary of the investigation to trace the Bramley family was £50,000.

Feltham Young Offenders Institution

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what is the number of staff on establishment at Feltham Young Offenders Institution when it is at full strength; and what is the current number of staff at Feltham; [67048]

(2) when it is planned to end doubled-up cell accommodation at Feltham Young Offenders Institution. [67047]

Mr. George Howarth: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) on 21 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *554*.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many young offenders on remand at Feltham Young Offenders' Unit were locked in their cells for 22 hours or more on any day between July and October 1998. [66399]

Mr. George Howarth: The Prison Service records time out of cell for prisoners by establishment. Recording of time out of cell is not broken down between remand and convicted prisoners and separate figures could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Between 29 June and 12 December 1998 at Feltham Young Offenders Institution, the average time out of cell for wings which held remand prisoners, was 22.5 hours per week. It is not possible to identify which prisoners did not receive more than two hours out of cell as the figures available are calculated on a wing rather than an individual basis.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the practice of doubling up on cell accommodation at Feltham is planned to end. [66400]

Mr. George Howarth: At the end of December 1998, 14 prisoners at Feltham were located in seven cells designed for one. Steps are being taken to address this issue and doubling is expected to cease at Feltham shortly.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many patients sectioned under the Mental Health Act 1983 aged *(a)* 5 to 17 years and *(b)* 17 to 21 years were held in the health care centre at Feltham Young Offenders Unit between October 1997 and December 1998. [66395]

Mr. George Howarth: Between October 1997 and December 1998, seven prisoners aged from 15 to 17 and 39 aged from 18 to 21 were transferred to hospital from Feltham Young Offenders Institution by direction of the Home Secretary under sections 47 and 48 of the Mental Health Act 1983. The majority will have been held in the health care centre before being transferred.

Prison Service (Recruitment)

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the impact of the Job Simulation Assessment Centre system of prison service recruitment. [67046]

Mr. George Howarth: Job Simulation Assessment Centres (JSACs) form part of the new approach to recruitment within the Prison Service. JSACs have been developed to provide fairer, more objective and more reliable assessments of candidates than the recruitment process which they replaced.

The evidence to date is that the use of JSACs has resulted in a perceptible improvement in the calibre of new prison officers under training together with increased numbers entering the Prison Service from ethnic minorities. The Prison Service is continuing to evaluate the new arrangements with the assistance of Goldsmiths College, University of London.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what research he has commissioned to ascertain how asylum seekers who have not taken up the offer of assistance under the National Assistance Act 1948 are currently supporting themselves. [67114]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have commissioned no new research into this subject.

Prisons Inspectorate

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisons were visited in England and Wales by Sir David Ramsbotham during the last 12 months; and how many of his reports of such visits have to date been published. [67223]

Mr. George Howarth: During the year 15 January 1998 to 15 January 1999, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons visited 40 Prison Service establishments in England and Wales. To date, 25 reports have been published. Ten reports have been submitted to the Home Secretary and are currently with the Prison Service which, in line with the agreed protocol, is checking their factual accuracy. The remaining five reports are still in preparation.

Prison Officers (Ethnic Minority Communities)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what percentage of uniformed prison officers who are working in prisons in England and Wales are from ethnic minority communities. [67220]

Mr. George Howarth: As at 31 December 1998, 2.5 per cent of uniformed prison officer grades are from ethnic minority communities.

Immigration and Nationality Directorate

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many inquiries were made to the PEO of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate in Croydon on 15 January. [67239]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: On Monday 18 January 1999, 754 callers came to the Public Enquiry Office in Croydon.

Electronic Warfare

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the threats posed to systems and data, critical to the national infrastructure, by electronic attack. [67441]

Mr. Straw: The Government will be introducing a series of measures to minimise the risk of electronic attack. This will enhance the United Kingdom's reputation as a safe place to undertake electronic commerce. The present risk should not be exaggerated but we must take action. The measures include:

ensuring that within Government all critical systems are identified and that the protection of those systems is effectively managed and audited; working with the private sector to develop measures, which keep pace with the levels of risk, to ensure adequate standards of protection for the key systems falling within the critical national infrastructure;

raising awareness and standards of information security more generally in the private sector by pursuing existing initiatives to promote best practice; and developing a dialogue on these issues with international partners.

In view of my responsibilities for crime prevention and public protection, I will be taking lead responsibility within government for this new work. Government Departments will ensure that the security of their systems is kept under review and, in relevant cases, existing initiatives are pursued with the private sector.

Ensuring that our electronic systems are properly protected from electronic attack is a longer-term enterprise which will not be at the expense of the immediate challenge we are facing to deal with the Millennium Bug.

Circuses (Winter Quarters)

Mr. Cawsey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what powers local authorities have to regulate circus winter quarters. [67414]

Mr. George Howarth: Winter quarters are not defined in animal welfare legislation, but are taken as meaning the place where the circus animals are kept during the winter while the circus is not touring.

Under the Performing Animals (Regulation) Act 1925, local authorities and the police have the power to enter at all reasonable times and inspect any premises in which performing animals are kept for training or exhibition, and to inspect the animals kept there.

Under the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976, local authorities have the power to inspect any premises where any wild animal is kept. The Act does not apply to any dangerous wild animal kept in a circus, which is defined as including

"any place where animals are kept or introduced wholly or mainly for the purpose of performing tricks or manoeuvres".

For winter quarters, local authorities have the power to enforce, on behalf of the Health and Safety Commission, the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974 and other relevant statutory provisions within the meaning of the Act.

Home Detention Curfew Orders

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners were eligible to be considered for release on 28 January under the home detention curfew provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 subject to an enhanced risk procedure. [67316]

Mr. George Howarth: We estimate that about 135 prisoners will meet the eligibility criteria under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 to be considered for a home detention curfew starting on 28 January 1999. All prisoners eligible to be assessed for the home detention curfew scheme would be subject to a rigorous enhanced risk assessment if this was judged necessary in the particular case.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the timetable for further releases after 28 January under the home detention curfew provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998; and what is the most recent estimate of the number of prisoners to be released. [66992]

Mr. George Howarth: From 28 January, prisoners eligible for home detention curfew under the provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 will, if assessed as suitable for home detention curfew, be placed on curfew on their home detention curfew eligibility date, or as soon as possible thereafter once the assessment has been completed. Prisoners whose eligibility date falls on a weekend or bank holiday will not be released until the next working day. The numbers of offenders on home detention curfew will build up over the 60 days after 28 January to reach the standard number of offenders likely to be on curfew at any one time.

The numbers of prisoners placed on home detention curfew will depend on the assessments conducted by prison governors. On the basis of trials of the risk assessment conducted in a range of establishments last year, it was provisionally estimated that around 4,000 offenders might be on home detention curfew at any one time.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many of the prisoners to be released on 28 January under the home detention curfew provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 were subject to an enhanced risk assessment procedure. [66989]

Mr. George Howarth: The assessments for home detention curfew are still ongoing. I will write to the hon. Member after 28 January, when this information becomes available.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many of the prisoners eligible to be considered for release on 28 January under the home detention curfew provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 are serving sentences of *(a)* three years or *(b)* more than three years. [67313]

Mr. George Howarth: This data will not be available until after 28 January. The likely numbers would be too small for a reliable estimate to be made on the basis of more global figures. I will write to the hon. Member after 28 January when this information is available.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners are *(a)* eligible for release and *(b)* being released on 28 January under the home detention curfew provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. [66988]

Mr. George Howarth: We estimate that about 135 prisoners will meet the eligibility criteria under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 to be considered for a home detention curfew starting on 28 January 1999. If 50 per cent. of those eligible were suitable for release on home detention curfew, this would mean that an estimated 60–70 prisoners would be placed on home detention curfew on 28 January.

No eligible prisoner will be placed on the home detention curfew scheme without the completion of a rigorous assessment of their suitability. The assessments for home detention curfew are still ongoing. I will write to the hon. Member when information on the numbers of prisoners who were curfewed, on 28 January 1999 is available.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many of the prisoners to be released on 28 January under the home detention curfew provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 are serving sentences as a result of convictions for offences *(a)* of violence, *(b)* of burglary and *(c)* to which Part I of the Sex Offenders Act 1997 applies. [66990]

Mr. George Howarth: The assessments for home detention curfew are still ongoing. I will write to the hon. Member after 28 January, when this information is available.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners eligible to be considered for release on home detention curfew on 28 January are serving sentences as a result of convictions for offences *(a)* of violence, *(b)* of burglary and *(c)* to which Part I of the Sex Offenders Act 1997 applies. [67314]

Mr. George Howarth: We estimate that about 45 prisoners serving sentences as a result of convictions for violence, about 40 prisoners serving sentences as a result of convictions for burglary, and less than 10 prisoners serving sentences as a result of convictions to which Part I of the Sex Offenders Act 1997 applies, would, on 28 January, meet the eligibility criteria set out in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 for the home detention curfew scheme. However, no offender serving a sentence as a result of convictions for offences to which Part I of the Sex Offenders Act 1997 applies will be placed on a home detention curfew other than in exceptional circumstances and following the most rigorous enhanced risk assessment.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if offenders sentenced to three years imprisonment under the provisions of the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997 relating to minimum sentences for persistent burglars will be eligible for release on home detention curfew. [67142]

Mr. Boateng: Those sentenced under the provisions of section 4 of the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997 are not automatically excluded from being considered for the Home Detention Curfew scheme. However, Home Detention Curfew is not an entitlement, and only those prisoners who pass a risk assessment will be allowed on the scheme.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many of the prisoners to be released on 28 January under the home detention curfew provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 have curfew conditions specifying *(a)* nine hours, *(b)* a period of between nine and 12 hours and *(c)* more than 12 hours as the period to which they are subject to a home detention curfew. [66987]

Mr. George Howarth: The information is not held centrally.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many of the prisoners to be released on 28 January under the home detention curfew provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 are serving sentences of *(a)* three years and *(b)* more than three years imprisonment. [66991]

Mr. George Howarth: The assessments for home detention curfew are still ongoing. I will write to the hon. Member after 28 January, when this information is available.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many of the prisoners who are *(a)* to be released and *(b)* eligible for release on 28 January under the home detention curfew provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 were serving sentences of six months' imprisonment. [67315]

Mr. George Howarth: These data will not be available until after 28 January. The likely numbers would be too small for a reliable estimate to be made on the basis of more global figures. I will write to the hon. Member after 28 January when this information is available.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how long is spent in custody by *(a)* an offender serving a sentence of 10 weeks imprisonment and *(b)* an offender serving a sentence of three months imprisonment who is suitable for release on home detention curfew. [67312]

Mr. George Howarth: A prisoner who is serving a sentence of ten weeks imprisonment would normally be entitled to automatic release once he had served half of that period. The period in custody may last, however, up to the full ten weeks if the prisoner is subject to additional days imposed by the prison governor for disciplinary offences.

An offender serving a sentence of three months imprisonment would normally be entitled to automatic release after serving half that period. If he were allowed home detention curfew, he could expect to spend 30 days in custody, and then serve the period until the halfway point of sentence on a curfew enforced by electronic monitoring. Home detention curfew is not an entitlement, and only those prisoners who pass a risk assessment will be allowed on the scheme. The period in custody may last up to the full three months in custody if the prisoner is subject to additional days imposed by the prison governor for disciplinary offences.

Young Offenders

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to the reply of 14 January from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth), to the hon. Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox), if the distinct estate for boys aged 15 to 17 years remanded

or sentenced to custody is *(a)* to be managed by the Prison Service and *(b)* to be located in existing Prison Service premises. [66993]

Mr. George Howarth: The new distinct estate for boys aged 15 to 17-years-old, remanded or sentenced to custody, will be managed by the Prison Service, either directly or under contract, and will comprise of a mix of dedicated juvenile establishments and juvenile units within Young Offender Institutions. The premises will be upgraded to offer enhanced regime facilities and, where necessary, adapted to ensure the separation of 15 to 17-year-old boys and older young offenders.

Calfa Case

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the impact of the decision of the European Court in the case of Calfa (C-348/96) on *(a)* criminal law in the United Kingdom and *(b)* the development of a EU system of criminal law; and if he will make a statement. [67054]

Kate Hoey: The judgment of the European Court in the case of Calfa (C-348/96) has no effect on criminal law in the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom does not have legislation requiring automatic deportation akin to the Greek law at issue in this case. Nor does the judgment significantly further the development of an European Union system of criminal law. The judgment is in line with previous jurisprudence of the Court and is concerned with the compatibility of the Greek law with Community law on free movement.

Electronic Tagging

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many offenders are currently subject to electronic tagging. [67143]

Mr. George Howarth: As of 18 January 1999, 540 offenders are being electronically monitored in England and Wales; 447 offenders under the Criminal Justice Act 1991, 55 under the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997 and 38 cases in which electronic monitoring has been imposed as a condition of bail.

Correspondence

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State with responsibility for immigration, the hon. Member for North Warwickshire, (Mr. O'Brien) plans to reply to the letter of 23 December from the hon. Member for Hertsmere. [66986]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I will write shortly.

My reply will also respond to the points raised in the hon. Member's further letter of 24 January.

Life Sentences

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to review the mandatory life sentence for murder. [66212]

Mr. Boateng: The Government have no plans to review the mandatory life sentence for murder.

Young Offenders (Medical Assessment and Examination)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidelines his Department has issued on the medical assessment and examination of young offenders on induction into young offender units. [66392]

Mr. George Howarth: The Prison Service published health care standards cover the health assessment and examination of all prisoners, including young offenders, on first reception into custody. These were laid down in 1994.

Prison Visitors (Drugs Smuggling)

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action he is taking to deter prisoners and their visitors from smuggling drugs into prison through visits. [67724]

Mr. Straw: Governors have a range of sanctions available to deal with visitors, prisoners and young offenders involved in such activity. But I am keen to see a more consistent approach across the prison estate. To this end, I have asked the Director General of the Prison Service to introduce a more standardised response.

It is clear that most drugs coming into prison are brought in by visitors. I intend to provide governors with a new power to ban a visitor for a specified time. The imposition of a ban, and its duration, will be determined by the quantity and type of drugs passed, the relationship between the visitor, prisoner or young offender and the circumstances of the offence. I would expect a typical ban to be at least three months. In cases where a ban is not justified, visitors may be subject to warnings, closed visits and increased security. Prison and Young Offender Institution staff will continue to report all attempts to smuggle drugs to the police.

Prisoners and young offenders believed to be involved in bringing in drugs will face the increased use of closed visits, regular targeted mandatory drug testing, and disciplinary proceedings.

These measures will support one of the key elements in our overall prison drugs strategy namely supply reduction. The Prison Service will also maintain its commitment to the provision of drug treatment and education within prisons. Last year's Comprehensive Spending Review resulted in an additional £14 million for treatment, £6 million for throughcare and £2.5 million for voluntary testing.

A short implementation phase for the new measures will take place, enabling relevant parties to be briefed on the new arrangements, before they are universally implemented on 1 April 1999.

Sexual Offences Review

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the Government will announce the terms of reference for their review of sexual offences. [67722]

Mr. Straw: The intention to review sexual offences and penalties was announced by the then Minister of State, Home Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael), on 15 June

1998, *Official Report*, column 10. I have today published the terms of reference of this review. Copies of a consultation leaflet describing the review, and inviting views to inform its work, have been placed in the Library.

The terms of reference of the review are:

"To review the sexual offences in the common and statute law of England and Wales, and make recommendations that will:

Provide coherent and clear sexual offences which protect individuals, especially children and the more vulnerable, from abuse and exploitation;

Enable abusers to be appropriately punished; and

Be fair and non-discriminatory in accordance with the European Court of Human Rights and the Human Rights Act."

The review will be conducted by a Steering Group of officials from relevant Departments and expert advisers. This Group will have the benefit of advice from an External Reference Group made up of individuals and organisations with experience, expertise and opinions on a range of issues relevant to the consideration of sexual offences. The review should take about a year to complete its work and its recommendations will form the basis of a consultation paper.

Child Protection

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the Interdepartmental Working Group on Preventing Unsuitable People from Working with Children and Abuse of Trust has made its report; and if he will make a statement. [67723]

Mr. Straw: I have today placed a copy of the report of the Interdepartmental Working group in the Library. This follows their interim report on abuse of trust which I placed in the Library on 25 November last year.

The Working Group have made a number of recommendations in principle for establishing an integrated scheme to help prevent unsuitable people from working with children. Following a written consultation exercise they undertook initial discussion of the emerging proposals with a number of organisations outside Government before making their report and received their broad support. Their report acknowledges there is much work to be done on the scheme including further consultation. The detailed elements of the scheme will need to be worked up before firm proposals can be made.

The Government welcome the report as the basis for an integrated scheme to provide greater protection for children and, in due course, vulnerable adults. We have asked the Working Group to work up the proposals as a matter of priority with a view to bringing forward detailed recommendations. Primary legislation will be required to put the new scheme in place.

The integrated scheme envisages a central access point for three sources of information, criminal records (with certain offences attracting a ban on working with children); List 99 (maintained by the Department for Education and Employment); and the Consultancy Index (maintained by the Department of Health). This central access point would be the Criminal Records Bureau. The Protection of Children Bill currently before Parliament makes provision for the necessary amendment to Part V of the Police Act 1997 for the Bureau to act as a one stop shop able to receive and pass on information from List 99 and the Consultancy Index. This should allow work on this wider role to form part of the work now underway on establishing the Criminal Records Bureau.

Strategic Police Operations

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidance his Department issues on the provision of information by police constabulary or police authorities on the costs to the public purse of major strategic police operations. [66333]

Mr. Boateng: No central guidance has been issued. It is for the police authority and the chief constable to account for the force's expenditure. Chief Constables will generally maintain records of the cost of major police operations and investigations not only for the purposes of sound financial management, but to keep their police authorities and the public informed.

We issued guidance on efficiency planning to Chief Constables and police authorities last November. We are also working with the service to develop a robust and consistent approach to activity costing, which will help the service to identify and manage the pressures it has.

EU Legislation

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department to what extent his Department treats EU legislation as an international agreement; and if he will make a statement. [66914]

Kate Hoey: Legally binding instructions adopted pursuant to Title V or Title VI of the Treaty of European Union (the "Second and Third Pillars") are treated as international agreements governed by international law. In this way, they differ from legislation adopted under the Treaties establishing the European Communities, which forms part of community law.

Channel Islands

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the nature of the advice given to the Channel Islands representatives by the Minister of State, Lord Williams of Mostyn, on 16 October 1998 on their constitutional position, with particular reference to the European Union Code of Conduct on Business Taxation. [66913]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Following the meeting on 16 October between my noble Friend, the Minister of State, Lord Williams of Mostyn, United Kingdom officials and representatives of the Channel Islands and Isle of Man, descriptions of the constitutional relationship between the United Kingdom and the Bailiwicks of Jersey and Guernsey and the Isle of Man, discussed with the Island authorities, were submitted to the European Union Code of Conduct Group.

CABINET OFFICE

Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what *(a)* secretarial and *(b)* other administrative help is given to right hon. and hon. Liberal

Democrat Members of the Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee; and what is the estimated cost of this assistance to date. [66880]

Dr. Jack Cunningham *[holding answer 21 January 1999]:* No dedicated staff support is provided to the Liberal Democrats. There are two individuals (one in 10 Downing Street and one in the Cabinet Office Secretariat) who are the designated points of liaison with the Liberal Democrats in relation to the Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee. This role is undertaken as part of their normal job and no additional costs are involved.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Disabled Claimants (Facilities)

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what provision is planned for disabled claimants attending Single Gateway to Work interviews in job centres which do not have appropriate toilet facilities; and what plans he has to offer such interviews in alternative venues which do have appropriate toilet facilities. [67393]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Employment Service (ES) have been interviewing people with disabilities to help them, where appropriate, into work for many years. Since 1995 the Employment Service has been implementing a planned programme of works in its Jobcentres to improve access and facilities for disabled people, including disabled toilets. 64 per cent. of all Jobcentres have disabled toilet provision.

Where dedicated disabled toilets are not available, Jobcentre staff are sympathetic to the needs of their disabled clients and make staff facilities available to them. Where wheelchair access is a problem and there are no disabled toilets available, disabled clients can if they wish, be interviewed at another nearby Jobcentre with facilities or, if necessary in their own homes.

A review will be undertaken of accessibility to facilities used for the Single Work Focused Gateway interviews so that the best possible service can be made available to disabled clients.

Secondary Education (Reorganisation Costs)

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps his Department has taken to estimate the costs of re-organising secondary education in any area which votes to end selection. [67412]

Ms Estelle Morris: None. As I have explained in my replies to previous questions on the subject of reorganisation which may result from parents voting in favour of ending selection, the law only requires the admissions authorities of the grammar schools involved to change their admission arrangements. Any other changes would be a matter for decision at local level.

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what funds are available in his Department's budget for helping local education authorities faced with extra costs as a result of secondary school re-organisation following any ballot which ends selective education. [66232]

Ms Estelle Morris: If parents choose to trigger a ballot and vote in favour of removing selection, the law would only require the admissions authorities of the grammar schools involved to change their admission arrangements. Any other changes would be a matter for decision at local level. If schools and local education authorities agreed other changes, they would plan them within the resources available.

School Consultation Exercise

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 18 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *351*, if he will list the 27 consultation documents issued by his Department in 1998 for which a response time of 10 weeks or more was given. [67579]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The consultation documents and response times were as follows:

Month	*Consultation Document*	*Response Time*
January	Numeracy matters: The preliminary report of the numeracy task force	10 weeks
February	Draft guidance on LEA educational development plans	10 weeks
March	LEA-School relations: Draft Code of Practice	10 weeks
	The regulations of early education and day care	16 weeks
April	Parent governor representatives on education committees	14 weeks
	Implications of religious designation	10 weeks
	Homework: Draft guidelines for secondary schools	10 weeks
	Homework: Draft guidelines for primary schools	10 weeks
	Education and day care	10 weeks
	Induction for new teachers—a consultation document	10 weeks
	Composition of the general teaching council (GTC)	13 weeks
	Meeting the childcare challenge—Green paper on national childcare strategy + summary	10 weeks
	New arrangements for effective student support in further education	10 weeks
	The education (Grammar School ballots) draft regulations 1998	10 weeks
	The religious character of schools (designated procedure) draft regulations 1998	10 weeks
July	Changing the procedures for calculating 1998 performance tables to include excluded pupils	10 weeks
	Home-schools agreements—Draft guidance for schools and LEAs	10 weeks
	Target setting for reducing exclusions and unauthorised absence	10 weeks
	Promoting disabled people's rights: Creating a disability rights commission fit for the 21st Century	12 weeks
	Review of TECs: TECs—Meeting the challenge of the millennium	11 weeks

Month	Consultation Document	Response Time
	Locally agreed syllabuses for religious education: Draft order	15 weeks
	Targets for reducing exclusion and unauthorised absence	10 weeks
	New requirements to make goods and facilities and services more accessible to disabled people	10 weeks
October	Ingredients for success: a consultation paper on nutritional standards for school lunches	12 weeks
	Draft regulations under Section 494 of the Education Act 1996	10 weeks
	School and business—Sustaining partnerships	10 weeks
December	Draft regulations on the statutory arrangements for induction	10 weeks
	Teachers: Meetings the challenge of change (green paper) + summary and questionnaire	16 weeks

New Opportunities Fund (ICT Training)

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) by what date the CD Rom being prepared for the Teacher Training Agency by ICL to assist in the self-assessment procedure for bids for the New Opportunities Fund moneys for information and communications technology skills training will be available to schools; [67388]

(2) by what date the self-assessment materials required by schools to bid for the New Opportunities Fund moneys for information and communications technology skills training will be available to them. [67389]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Work carried out in-house by the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) will ensure that packs of printed materials are available to schools prior to Easter 1999. These packs will contain the expected outcomes of the New Opportunities Fund training, case studies by subject and phase to exemplify key factors for teachers in deciding when and how to use Information and Communications Technologies effectively, pro-formas for recording training needs, and guidance on the use of materials. These materials, together with those for school librarians, will also be available in electronic format through the National Grid for Learning.

This first phase is to be extended in scope through the provision of further case studies in an interactive CD-ROM format, for which initial work has been undertaken by ICL. The TTA is now continuing the development and production in time to despatch the CD-ROM to schools in the summer term, for use during the training programme.

Redundancies (K Shoes)

Mr. Collins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assistance his Department will make available to those made redundant by K Shoes in Kendal in the first quarter of 1999. [67013]

Mr. Mudie: Officials from the Employment Service will be visiting the factory every week to answer questions and offer Jobsearch advice. Additionally, the local Jobcentre are arranging to display job vacancies within the factory.

The redundancy has been declared as 'Large Scale' which means that employees who are being made redundant will have preferential access onto Employment Service and Enterprise Cumbria's (formerly the TEC) programmes.

Enterprise Cumbria in conjunction with Cumbria Careers are working closely with the company and have offered them a comprehensive package of assistance, including careers counselling and a resident training Adviser.

Glasgow Employment Zone

Mr. David Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to increase the budget of the Glasgow Employment Zone; and if he will make a statement. [67642]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Employment Service is negotiating with Glasgow Employment Zone to determine the funds required for the Zone's delivery plan proposals for 1999–2000.

Mr. David Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the total budget for the Glasgow Employment Zone; how much funding is received from the European social fund; and if he will make a statement. [67641]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The ES contribution to the Glasgow Employment Zone is based on the number of long-term unemployed people participants it attracts. The 1998–99 contract was re-negotiated in November and is currently valued at £801,012 for 900 participants. The Zone was awarded £391,000 from the European Social Fund towards its 1998 costs. Overall expenditure in 1998 is likely to be less than anticipated; this will correspondingly reduce the amount of European Social Fund grant.

Labour and Social Affairs Ministers Meeting

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is on the agenda for the Council meeting of Ministers for Labour and Social Affairs from 4 to 6 February; and which Minister will be attending. [67411]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The informal meeting of EU Labour Minister will focus on two topics. The first will be the German presidency plans in employment and social affairs. The second will be the partnership between economic and monetary union and employment.

The Minister of State, Department of Trade and Industry, my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney), and I expect to attend the meeting.

Education Action Zones

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 18 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *352*, if he will break down the money so far received by the 25 education action zones, into the sums paid in *(a)* cash and *(b)* kind for each education action zone. [67635]

Ms Estelle Morris: A detailed breakdown will be provided in the audited financial statements which each zone is required to provide by the end of the year.

Disability Rights Commission

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 11 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *97*, if he will list the assessments of associated costs for each of proposed functions of the Disability Rights Commission. [67621]

Ms Hodge: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave on 18 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *352*.

Early Education (Portsmouth)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the participation rate of three-year-olds in early education in Portsmouth. [67226]

Ms Hodge: The information is not available in the form requested. There were 459 three year olds in maintained nursery and primary schools in the Portsmouth Local Education Authority area in January 1998. In addition, the Government are supporting a significant national expansion of free places for three year olds in the maintained, voluntary and private sectors from 1999–2000.

Supply Teachers

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the number of supply teachers employed within each local education authority at the latest date for which information is available. [65909]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information is in the table.

Occasional teachers[1] by local education authority in England January 1997 and 1998

Local Education Authority	*1998*
City of London	0
Camden	88
Greenwich	71
Hackney	76
Hammersmith & Fulham	89
Islington	58
Kensington & Chelsea	74
Lambeth	31
Lewisham	97
Southwark	132
Tower Hamlets	112
Wandsworth	69
City of Westminster	70
Barking	96
Barnet	64
Bexley	62
Brent	56
Bromley	39
Croydon	101
Ealing	59
Enfield	87
Haringey	119
Harrow	39
Havering	67
Hillingdon	31
Hounslow	61
Kingston	39
Merton	70
Newham	157
Redbridge	38
Richmond	24
Sutton	44
Waltham Forest	47
Birmingham	463
Coventry	82
Dudley	131
Sandwell	65
Solihull	79
Walsall	62
Wolverhampton	72
Knowsley	55
Liverpool	130
St. Helens	62
Sefton	90
Wirral	89
Bolton	102
Bury	54
Manchester	143
Oldham	43
Rochdale	92
Salford	110
Stockport	125
Tameside	29
Trafford	59
Wigan	184
Barnsley	99
Doncaster	74
Rotherham	98
Sheffield	152
Bradford	116
Calderdale	52
Kirklees	112
Leeds	164
Wakefield	94
Gateshead	56
Newcastle-Upon-Tyne	72
North Tyneside	61
South Tyneside	29
Sunderland	105
Isles of Scilly	0
Bath & North East Somerset	28
City of Bristol	155
North Somerset	77
South Gloucestershire	66
Hartlepool	28
Middlesborough	42
Redcar and Cleveland	51
Stockton on Tees	70
City of Kingston-Upon-Hull	91
East Riding of Yorkshire	89
North East Lincolnshire	69
North Lincolnshire	87
North Yorkshire	126
York	80
Bedfordshire	206
Luton	83
Bedfordshire	289
Buckinghamshire	37
Milton Keynes	38
Buckinghamshire	75
Derbyshire	189
Derby	51
Derbyshire	240
Dorset	2
Poole	33
Bournemouth	40
Dorset	75
Durham	217
Darlington	13
Durham	230
East Sussex	95
Brighton & Hove	43
East Sussex	138
Hampshire	293
Portsmouth	36
Southampton	48
Hampshire	377
Leicstershire	82

Occasional teachers[1] by local education authority in England January 1997 and 1998

Occasional teachers[1] by local education authority in England January 1997 and 1998

Local Education Authority	*1998*
Leicester City	68
Rutland	5
Leicestershire	155
Staffordshire	253
Stoke	72
Staffordshire	325
Wiltshire	68
Swindon	37
Wiltshire	105
Berkshire	126
Cambridgeshire	124
Cheshire	151
Cornwall	126
Cumbria	133
Devon	247
Essex	236
Gloucestershire	78
Hereford & Worcester	141
Hertfordshire	93
Isle of Wight	38
Kent	129
Lancashire	513
Lincolnshire	137
Norfolk	156
Northamptonshire	241
Northumberland	138
Nottinghamshire	454
Oxfordshire	112
Shropshire	129
Somerset	137
Suffolk	229
Surrey	134
Warwickshire	106
West Sussex	101
Total	13,149

[1] Occasional teachers are employed on a day to day or short term contract (less than one month) in response to a specific vacancy or short term absence. Figures relate to teachers employed for the whole of the third Thursday in January of each year.

Notes:

1. The data are for maintained nursery, primary, secondary, special schools, Pupil Referral Units and education otherwise than in schools.
2. By way of comparison, in 1997, there were 13,611 such teachers employed by LEAs.

Education Maintenance Allowance

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he proposes to make an announcement on the pilot areas for the education maintenance allowance. [66231]

Mr. Mudie: We expect to announce the Education Maintenance Allowance Pilot areas within the next month.

Nannies

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what factors underlay the decision to change the rules governing the regulation of nanny agencies; [66931]

(2) what assessment he has made of the Better Regulation Task Force's report into the regulation of nannies. [66933]

Ms Hodge: More than 650 responses to the consultation paper on the regulation of early education and day care were considered in developing the proposals relating to nannies, including those advocating a national register. The Government concluded, like the Better Regulation Task Force, that a register would be bureaucratic and unworkable and would raise false expectations among parents. Rather, the Government propose to work with the industry to establish new, higher standards for nanny agencies which are clear to parents, supported by guidance to all parents on employing child carers in the home.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Sea Anglers

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) if he will list the occasions when sea anglers have been prohibited from landing fish consequent upon the need to close fisheries to vessels under 10m in length; [67150]

(2) when his Department reclassified landings by sea anglers from being part of the natural mortality of fish to being part of the quota; and if he will make a statement; [67151]

(3) which EU regulation requires him to take account of landings made by sea anglers for quota management purposes. [67149]

Mr. Morley: Council Regulation (EEC) No. 3760/92 of 20 December 1992, establishing a Community system for fisheries and aquaculture, requires Member States to ensure that non-commercial activities do not jeopardise the conservation and management of resources covered by the common fisheries policy. The annual EU Council regulations, laying down total allowable catches and quotas for the coming year, make no exemption for landings by vessels fishing for pleasure.

Fisheries closures orders have applied to sea angling since the introduction of the current quota management arrangements in the mid-1980s. The table lists the closures for 1998 which have applied to both commercial vessels of 10m and under in overall length and to vessels fishing for pleasure. Most of these closures would have had little, if any, impact on recreational sea angling because of the stocks involved or the timing of the closure.

	Date
North Sea sole	14 January-21 April
Area VIIhjk plaice, West of Scotland sole, Area VIIhjk sole, Norway others	14 January-31 December
Area VII b-k cod	12 May-6 September
Area VIIe sole	7 September-31 December
North Sea herring	15 December-31 December
West Coast mackerel	18 December-31 December

Genetically Modified Organisms

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if agricultural crops

engineered to contain biopesticides will be regulated as foods or pesticides; and if he will make a statement. [66013]

Mr. Rooker: Agricultural crops that have been genetically modified to contain biopesticides are regulated under EC Directive (90/220) on the deliberate release of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) into the environment rather than under pesticides legislation. Foods derived from such crops are regulated under the EC Novel Foods and Novel Food Ingredients Regulation (258/97). The aim of both these sets of regulations is to ensure that all crops that have been modified to improve insect resistance, and their products, have been thoroughly assessed for environmental and food safety before being allowed onto the market. In this respect they provide comparable environmental and consumer protection to the legislation on pesticides.

BSE

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many confirmed BSE cases there were in each year between 1988 and 1998 in *(a)* Eire, *(b)* Portugal and *(c)* Switzerland. [66561]

Mr. Rooker: The following table shows by calendar year the number of confirmed cases of BSE in Eire, Portugal and Switzerland.

Number of confirmed BSE cases per year

Year	*Eire* [1]	*Portugal* [1]	*Switzerland* [2]
1988	0	0	—
1989	0	0	—
1990	11	0	1
1991	17	0	9
1992	18	0	15
1993	16	1	29
1994	19	7	63
1995	16	14	68
1996	73	29	45
1997	77	30	38
1998[3]	79	104	14

[1] Data obtained from The Commission, Directorate-General VI 18/1/99.

[2] Based on data provided by the British Embassy, Berne.

[3] Date of last confirmation: Eire 23 December 1998, Portugal 31 December 1998, Switzerland 10 December 1998.

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what experiments have shown the presence of BSE infectivity in cattle feed. [66506]

Mr. Rooker: None. Existing methods for the surveillance of compliance with the statutory feed bans detect the presence of mammalian proteins rather than infectivity. The detection of infectivity would require inoculation of laboratory animals on a very large scale without guaranteeing a satisfactory outcome.

However, experiments have shown that if material which is rendered to produce meat and bone meal is artificially infected with either BSE or scrapie containing brain before rendering, detectable levels of infectivity can be found in the meat and bone meal resulting from the rendering processes which were in use in the UK in the late 1980s. Until July 1988, meat and bone meal was a permitted constituent of feed for cattle and sheep.

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the average figures for compensation paid to farmers for cattle each year between 1988 and 1998 that were *(a)* reported as suspect BSE cases and not subsequently confirmed as such, and *(b)* reported as suspect BSE cases and subsequently confirmed as such. [66505]

Mr. Rooker: The following table shows by calendar year the average compensation rates paid to farmers for animals slaughtered as BSE suspects:

£

Year	*Average compensation paid if BSE confirmed*	*Average compensation paid if BSE not confirmed*
1988	205.27	410.54
1989	314.61	629.22
1990	521.62	692.20
1991	543.84	679.81
1992	652.42	815.52
1993	889.89	1,112.37
1994	848.87	1,061.09
1995	618.78	773.47
1996	650.90	813.63
1997	578.15	722.68
1998	653.55	816.94

These figures have been calculated by dividing the total expenditure in a calendar year by the number of animals slaughtered as BSE suspects which were placed under restriction in that year. Because of the delay in making payments following slaughter and confirmation of the disease status of an animal, this calculation does not give a true average payment for the year.

A true average of individual payments could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Scrapie

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the procedures used in the current survey into sheep brains as discussed by SEAC on 9 November 1998; and if he will list how many have *(a)* been tested to date and *(b)* found to be diseased due to (i) sheep scrapie or (ii) BSE-like illness. [66502]

Mr. Rooker: In May 1997, SEAC recommended an abattoir survey of sheeps' brains to determine the likely exposure of the human population to transmissible spongiform encephalopathies in sheep submitted for slaughter. Sampling of material took place between August 1997 and August 1998 from almost 3,000 sheep selected at random from approximately 130 abattoirs throughout Great Britain. Tests have been carried out using histological, scrapie associated fibril (SAF), and immunocytochemical examinations. The preliminary findings are inconclusive with no cases of transmissible spongiform encephalopathy definitely confirmed. SEAC received a preliminary report in November 1998 but have not yet scheduled a substantive discussion on it. Further examination of brains and tonsils collected are expected to commence shortly. These tests will not differentiate whether the brains from the abattoir survey will have BSE or scrapie.

Currently, the only way of definitively differentiating BSE from scrapie involves testing suspect material in a panel of specially bred mice and observing the characteristics of any disease that develops. It takes 1–2 years for them to succumb to a disease, if they are incubating BSE, and longer if they are not. Two research projects are underway to examine clinical scrapie cases using this method. No cases of BSE have been found in any of the sheep from the national flock tested so far in this assay.

At their meeting on 9 November, SEAC discussed a draft report from their sheep sub-group which had been looking at research and surveillance for TSEs in sheep. A further draft is being prepared by the sub-group. It is expected that the final report will indicate the priority of recommendations for further work. This was explained by the Chairman of SEAC, Professor Sir John Pattison, at a press conference on 30 November 1998 when the public summary of the November meeting was issued.

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the changes in *(a)* compensation levels, *(b)* legal requirements and *(c)* administrative procedures in the reporting and confirmation of sheep scrapie in the last 10 years. [66501]

Mr. Rooker: *(a)* The rates since the payment of compensation was introduced in July 1998 are:

	£
July 1998	24.51
August 1998	25.34
September 1998	23.87
October 1998	19.54
November 1998	15.53
December 1998	15.41
January 1999	12.72

The compensation rate is equal to the average cull ewe price collected the calendar month two months before actual slaughter. It is a variable figure calculated monthly using prices collected from the Meat and Livestock Commission Weekly Market Survey. If an animal is clinically diagnosed by a Veterinary Officer as affected by scrapie, but this cannot be confirmed by laboratory diagnosis, owners may then be eligible to receive a greater payment, not exceeding £400, subject to documentary evidence of the animal's value.

(b) Scrapie was made a notifiable disease in the EC on 1 January 1993 by Council Directive 91/68 on animal health conditions governing intra-Community trade in ovine and caprine animals. This was implemented by The Specified Diseases (Notification) Order 1991, as amended by The Specified Diseases (Notification and Slaughter) Order 1992. Surveillance requirements including the compulsory slaughter of suspect animals, veterinary investigations, and the payment of compensation respectively, were laid down in the following SIs:

The Sheep and Goats Spongiform Encephalopathy Order 1998 (SI 1998/1645);

The Sheep and Goats Spongiform Encephalopathy Regulations 1998 (SI 1998/1646);

The Sheep and Goats Spongiform Encephalopathy (Compensation) Order 1998 (SI 1998/1647).

(c) Since 1 January 1993 owners of animals suspected of having scrapie have been required to notify the relevant Agriculture Department. If a clinical diagnosis of scrapie was made by a veterinary officer a movement restriction notice was served to prevent the movement of the suspect animal off the premises. Once the animal had died, or was slaughtered with the owner's agreement, the head was submitted to a veterinary investigation centre (VIC) for laboratory confirmation of scrapie. This was on the basis of examination of the brain material either by histological examination or by electron microscopy examination for scrapie associated fibrils at the Veterinary Laboratory Agency.

Although scrapie has been notifiable since 1993, not all cases were submitted for laboratory confirmation. From 1 January 1993 to 3 July 1996, in general, only the first case reported and subsequently confirmed on a holding in a 2 year period was sent for laboratory examination. Second and subsequent diagnoses were made on clinical grounds only. There were 75 of these between 1993 and 1996. These have been included in statistics as confirmed cases.

With the implementation of above mentioned SIs the slaughter of animals suspected of being clinically affected by scrapie is now compulsory. All suspect animals are slaughtered at a VIC (unless the animal is unfit to travel from the farm) who remove the tissues required for disease confirmation, and arrange for the carcase to be incinerated. Compensation is payable at the time of slaughter. A veterinary officer will complete an epidemiological investigation on farm on confirmation of disease on new premises.

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many reported and confirmed cases of sheep scrapie there were in the United Kingdom in each year from 1989 to 1998. [66500]

Mr. Rooker: Scrapie was made a notifiable disease in Great Britain on 1 January 1993 and in Northern Ireland on 31 December 1992.

The number of cases notified since 1993 is given in the following table for Great Britain only. Equivalent data is not available for Northern Ireland.

Year	*Cases reported*
1993	494
1994	327
1995	311
1996	549
1997	595
1998	[1]602

[1] 1998 data is provisional—data as at 13.1.99

Before 1993, notification was voluntary and of those reported, only confirmed cases were recorded. Cases confirmed by laboratory analysis for whole period 1989 to 1998 are given in the following table:

Year	Great Britain	Northern Ireland	Total UK
1989	252	7	259
1990	347	8	355
1991	906	0	906
1992	595	5	600
1993	306	4	310
1994	210	5	215
1995	232	2	234
1996	453	8	461
1997	508	1	509
1998	'417	1	'418

' 1998 data is provisional—data as at 13.1.99

Biomass Industry

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what support his Department is giving to the development of a United Kingdom biomass industry; and if he will make a statement. [66620]

Mr. Rooker: The Ministry, through the Alternative Crops Unit, promotes alternative crops including biomass at agricultural shows and farmer workshops and through a dedicated Website. In 1998 we secured, at the June Agriculture Council, an increase in the ceiling for the grant which can be paid to establish biomass crops, and the Forestry Commission immediately implemented this for a short-rotation coppice near the UK's first biomass-fuelled power station. Expenditure on strategic research and development totalled around £400,000. Future development of biomass crops depends on support to make them competitive with more traditional agricultural activities. This will depend on the outcome of Agenda 2000 and on finding the necessary resources.

Sheep Dip

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what provisions have been made for the disposal of List I and List II substances under the Groundwater Regulations 1998 when it is necessary to use them at short notice due to animal welfare considerations or other unforeseen circumstances. [66587]

Mr. Meale *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* I have been asked to reply.

The requirements for prior authorisation for disposals to land (subject to the exemptions specified) are of universal application under the Groundwater Regulations 1998. It would therefore be prudent for those who may need to undertake disposal at short notice to apply in advance for appropriate authorisation. Under transitional arrangements applications for authorisations may be made now, prior to the Regulations coming into force.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on responsibility under the Groundwater Regulations 1998 for obtaining the appropriate authorisations under the new legislation, with particular regard to the disposal of spent sheep dip. [66594]

Mr. Meale *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* I have been asked to reply.

Under the Groundwater Regulations 1998 it is the discharger who requires authorisation for a discharge. This is consistent with the Water Resources Act 1991, under which it is an offence to cause or knowingly permit any polluting matter to enter controlled waters, including groundwater—other than in accordance with a consent. Where the discharger and the landowner are not the same person, it will clearly be necessary for each to be aware of any authorisation and their consequent obligations.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what refund provisions there will be under the Groundwater Regulations 1998 for farmers who pay for an authorisation application on the basis of Environment Agency advice which is subsequently deemed unnecessary once the full guidance has been developed. [66588]

Mr. Meale *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* I have been asked to reply.

In line with the Environment Act 1995, Regulation 16 of the Groundwater Regulations 1998 provides for the Environment Agency to recover the costs of applications and prior investigations through a charging scheme. The Agency is responsible for the day to day operation of the charging scheme, and have indicated that where an application is made and the disposal is found to fall outside the scope of the Regulations, then the application fee will be refunded.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what provisions have been made under the Groundwater Regulations 1998 for the disposal of List I and List II substances in large areas of exposed aquifers, with particular reference to the Cotswolds. [66586]

Mr. Meale *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* I have been asked to reply.

The Goundwater Regulations 1998 apply throughout Scotland, England and Wales. It is not the intention of the Environment Agency in England and Wales and SEPA in Scotland to classify large areas of exposed aquifers, such as the Cotswolds, as unsuitable for disposal. However it is for these agencies to determine individual applications in the light of prior investigation of proposed disposal sites. Where authorisations cannot be granted it will be necessary for the applicant to identify alternative and acceptable disposal sites, alternative means of disposal or alternative methods of treatment for sheep which do not require disposals of waste products.

HEALTH

Attention Deficit Disorder Syndrome

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidelines his Department has issued on the recognition of the symptoms of potential attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in *(a)* children and *(b)* adults. [64909]

Mr. Hutton: The issue of clinical guidance on mental health problems is primarily a matter for the relevant professional bodies. However in relation to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in children the

Department has collaborated with professional and other groups seeking to raise general levels of awareness of ADHD and related disorders in order to facilitate better diagnosis and treatment. We have worked in this way with the Royal College of Psychiatrists in the production of factsheets on child mental health problems including attention deficit disorders, with representatives of general practitioners on similar guidance for general practitioners and with the voluntary group 'Young Minds' on advice for schools.

We support the initiative being taken by the Royal College of Psychiatrists Research Unit to produce evidence based briefing on the use of stimulant medication in ADHD. This will be published shortly.

The recognition of ADHD in adults is very recent in the United Kingdom. As far as we are aware, no clinical guidelines have yet been produced.

Health Services Accreditation

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects the next meeting of the Board of Health Services Accreditation to take place. [65495]

Mr. Denham: The Health Services Accreditation advisory board is still in place but there are currently no meetings scheduled. The board will meet when the health authority has made its final decision on Health Service Accreditation's future.

Older People

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how the findings of the Health Advisory Service 2000 report, "Not Because They Are Old", will be reflected in the development of improvement programmes. [65325]

Mr. Denham: A Health Service Circular (HSC1998/220) issued in November 1998 to all chief executives of health authorities and National Health Service trusts, along with a copy of the report "Not Because They Are Old" required chief executives of health authorities, in partnership with colleagues in NHS trusts and social services, to ensure that the findings of the report are considered when preparing Joint Investment Plans for older people.

These Joint Investment Plans will be included in local Health Improvement Programmes which will include both national and local priorities.

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he expects the findings of the Health Advisory Service 2000 report, "Not Because They are Old", are required to be reflected in service agreements for commissioning acute hospital services. [65321]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* Long-term service agreements will be a key means of delivering the local Health improvement programmes. Health improvement programmes becoming effective from April 1999 will include joint investment plans for services for older people which will consider the findings of the "Not Because They Are Old" report.

Agency Nurses

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish data on the number of agency nurses currently employed, in relation to full-time establishments in *(a)* each hospital trust and *(b)* each health authority and region. [66052]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not available centrally.

Resource Allocation Committee

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the membership of the Committee which determined the weighted capitation formula, indicating in each case the member's employer and whom the member represents. [66101]

Mr. Denham: The committee which gives advice to Ministers on these issues is the Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation. The list gives the current membership and shows either their National Health Service or other employer, or the organisation they represent. Members from health service bodies are invited to serve the committee in a personal capacity and not as representatives of their employer.

Membership of Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation

Name	*Organisation*
Chair	
Mr. S. Day	Regional Director, NHS Executive, West Midlands
Members	
Mr. I. Carruthers	Chief Executive, Dorset Health Authority
Dr. M. D'Souza	General Practitioner (National Association of Primary Care)
Dr. L. Davies	Regional Director of Public Health, NHS Executive, Trent
Professor I. Diamond	Dean of Social Sciences, University of Southampton
Mr. D. Edmundson	Chief Executive, North West Lancashire Health Authority
Mr. K. Ford	Chief Executive, Mayday Healthcare NHS Trust
Dr. J. Gilley	General Practitioner (British Medical Association)
Professor H. Glennerster	Department of Social Policy, London School of Economics
Mr. M. A. Harris	NHS Executive, Finance
Dr. C. Heath	General Practitioner (National Association of Primary Care)
Professor J. Higgins	Chair, Manchester Health Authority
Mr. C. Howgrave-Graham	Chief Executive, Coventry Health Authority
Mr. J. Hurst	NHS Executive, Economist
Dr. R. Hussey	Director of Public Health, Liverpool Health Authority
Mr. J. H. James	Chief Executive, Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster Health Authority
Mr. R. Jeavons	Chief Executive, Lincolnshire Health Authority

Membership of Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation

Name	*Organisation*
Professor Sir B. Jarman	Emeritus Professor of the Department of General Practice, Imperial College of Medicine
Professor K. Judge	Professor of Social Policy, Personal Social Services Research Unit, University of Kent
Ms R. MacDonald	Programme Director, Avon Health Authority
Mr. A. Meekings	Director of Finance and Performance, NHS Executive, South East
Professor P. C. Smith	Director of the Health Economics Programme, Centre for Health Economics, University of York
Mr. M. Swindells	Director of Clinical Services, Heatherwood and Wexham Park Hospital NHS Trust
Dr. A. Willis	General Practitioner (NHS Primary Care Group Alliance)

Royal London Hospital Trust

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what has been the level of price increases which the Royal London Hospital Trust has charged health authorities using its services *(a)* last year and *(b)* in the current year; what is the proposed increase for next year; what measures it is taking to achieve its three per cent. efficiency savings target; and if he will make a statement. [66100]

Mr. Denham: Information on the level of service agreements between individual National Health Service trusts and health authorities is not routinely collected by the NHS Executive. A national schedule of reference costs, published on 2 November 1998, contains information on hospital costs for 1997–98 and is available in the Library. Information on 1998–99 costs will be available in June 1999.

The NHS as a whole is expected to achieve an overall 3 per cent. efficiency improvement in 1999–2000. Details of measures taken by individual NHS trusts will be available from NHS trusts themselves.

Sickness Absence

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what targets for the reduction of sickness absence rates have been set for NHS trusts in England for the period to *(a)* 2001 and *(b)* 2003; and what account was taken in setting these targets of trusts' individual current sickness absence rates. [65911]

Mr. Denham: Targets for reductions of sickness absence rates for National Health Service trusts have been set at 20 per cent. by 2001 and 30 per cent. by 2003.

These targets reflect those defined by the Cabinet Office for the public sector as a whole, and therefore do not take into account individual NHS sickness absence rates.

Physiotherapy (Recruitment)

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans the Government have to tackle recruitment problems in physiotherapy. [66039]

Mr. Denham: We are employing a twin track approach to enable the National Health Service to secure the physiotherapists it needs by ensuring that training levels are sufficient to get a better match between supply and demand and by investing in initiatives to improve the recruitment, retention and return to practice of qualified staff, including more supportive and family-friendly ways of working.

Nurses' Pay

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will list the average pay levels for each nursing grade from 1992 to date; and if he will make a statement; [66048]

(2) if he will list the percentage pay increases to nurses for each year from 1992 to date; and if he will make a statement. [66047]

Mr. Denham: Estimated total annual average earnings for nursing staff by grade, taken from the Department's August 1997 earnings survey, are shown in the table. Similar information for earlier years is not available centrally, but advance letters issued to the National Health Service containing information about the national rates of pay for nursing staff since 1992 have been placed in the Library. These advance letters also give details of the percentage increases in the national rates of pay for nursing staff since 1992.

National Health Service hospital and community health services nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff: total annual average earnings by grade; England

£ per annum

Grade	*August 1997*	*December 1998* [1]
A	11,200	11,800
B	12,500	13,100
C	14,500	15,200
D	15,600	16,400
E	18,200	19,100
F	20,800	21,900
G	22,300	23,500
H	23,900	25,100
I	26,200	27,500

[1] Figures for December 1998 are extrapolated from figures for August 1997. They assume no change in the number of staff on each grade or incremental point, and incorporate all parts of the 1998–99 pay settlement for nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff.

Notes:

It is not possible to show annual percentage changes because the available figures do not cover a discrete 12 month period. Between August 1997 and December 1998 components of the 1997–98 and 1998–99 national pay settlements for nursing staff would have been implemented.

Total annual average pay was estimated across all incremental points for each grade.

Data are rounded to the nearest £100.

Source:

Department of Health's August 1997 NHS Earnings Survey

Hospital Bed Statistics

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the number of *(a)* general and *(b)* acute NHS hospital beds (i) nationally and (ii) in Shropshire for each year from 1992 to date; and if he will make a statement. [66050]

Mr. Denham: Bed availability data are collected by National Health Service trusts. The information provided in Table 2 is an aggregate of the figures for all NHS trusts to reflect the 1997–98 structure of the Shropshire Health Authority geographic area.

Table 1: Average daily number of available beds open overnight (i.e. 24 hours), 1991–92 to 1997–98, England

Year	Acute[1]	General[2] and acute	Total[3]
1991–92	115,140	157,247	242,677
1992–93	112,862	153,208	232,201
1993–94	109,713	147,153	219,476
1994–95	108,008	144,803	211,812
1995–96	108,296	142,624	206,136
1996–97	108,869	140,515	198,848
1997–98	107,807	138,047	193,625

Table 2: Average daily number of available beds open overnight (i.e. 24 hours), 1991–92 to 1997–98, Shropshire Health Authority

Year	Acute[1]	General[2] and acute	Total[3]
1991–92	1,076	1,216	1,709
1992–93	978	1,092	1,565
1993–94	859	1,096	1,510
1994–95	872	1,110	1,500
1995–96	817	1,084	1,471
1996–97	843	1,117	1,515
1997–98	791	1,059	1,398

[1] Since 1996–97, acute figures have included paediatric intensive care beds.
[2] General and acute is defined as acute plus geriatric.
[3] Total figures are for all specialities excluding neonatal cots in maternity wards.
Source:
Department of Health publications "Bed availability and occupancy for England" and "Bed availability for England"

Commercial Lobbyists

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what rules or guidance his Department has to govern the *(a)* formal and *(b)* informal interaction between his civil servants and commercial lobbyists. [66201]

Mr. Denham: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice), on 27 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *4*.

The guidance that was referred to in the response has since been fully adopted by the Department and its agencies.

Hospital Re-admissions

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish the first and second quarter figures for 1998–99 for the number of patients aged *(a)* under 20, *(b)* 20 to 59 and *(c)* 59 to 74 years who were readmitted to hospital as an emergency within 28 days of discharge. [66466]

Mr. Denham: The information is not available in the form requested. We will be publishing clinical indicators shortly which will include information on emergency re-admissions which occur within 28 days of hospital discharge. Data are being compiled using a complex process which links different hospital episodes for the same patient and will be available for the financial years 1995–96, 1996–97 and 1997–98.

Nurse Training

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the total number of nurse training places for each year from 1992 to date; and if he will make a statement. [66046]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is shown in the table.

Numbers of National Health Service funded pre-registration nurse training commissions 1992–93–1998–99

Year	Project 2000/ traditional commissions	Degree commissions	Total commissions (Project 2000/ traditional and degree)
1992–93	14,883	190	15,073
1993–94	12,439	199	12,623
1994–95	10,594	255	10,849
1995–96	11,495	256	11,751
1996–97	13,011	297	13,308
1997–98	14,429	297	14,726
1998–99[1]	15,523	[2]1,314	16,837

[1] 1998–99 data is forecast and subject to change.
[2] The increase in degree commissions in 1998–99 compared to 1997–98 is primarily due to the transfer of funding and responsibility for degree programmes from DfEE to Department of Health from September 1998.
Notes:
1. The training activity is funded through the Non-Medical Education and Training levy. It excludes training activity funded through Department for Education and Employment/other means.
2. In addition to the training activity there are pre-registration midwifery training commissions. However, this is not included here because we do not have comparable data for each year.

Cosmetic Dentistry

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to ensure that dentists engaging in cosmetic dentistry are skilled in the relevant techniques. [65788]

Mr. Denham: We are satisfied that the present undergraduate curriculum covers cosmetic dentistry adequately and that there are sufficient training opportunities for qualified dentists to update their skills. If my hon. Friend knows of a particular problem, we would be happy to investigate.

Food Standards Agency

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he anticipates the Food Standards Agency will begin giving guidance on health and diet. [66575]

Ms Jowell: We will be publishing a draft Bill for consultation later this month. If legislative time permits, we propose to introduce a revised Bill during the current Parliamentary session. If Parliament's assent is received quickly, we hope that the agency will begin work in 2000.

Private Hospital Beds

Mr. Steinberg: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the proportion of all private beds in use at any specific time. [66389]

Ms Jowell: In 1996–97, the latest figures for which information is available, 50.4 per cent. of beds in private hospitals and clinics in England registered under Section 23 of the Registered Homes Act 1984 were occupied at the time of inspection. Information on occupancy of private beds in National Health Service hospitals is not collected centrally.

Mr. Steinberg: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* private hospitals there are in England and Wales, *(b)* private beds there are in these hospitals and *(c)* private beds there are in NHS hospitals in England and Wales. [66388]

Ms Jowell: At 31 March 1998 there were 396 private hospitals and clinics in England with a total of 11,089 registered beds. Information on the number of private beds in NHS hospitals is not currently collected centrally.

The figures for Wales are a matter for my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Wales.

HIV/AIDS Steering Group

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the membership of the Steering Group convened to develop the HIV/AIDS strategy. [66577]

Ms Jowell: The membership of the steering group to develop the HIV/AIDS Strategy for England is currently under consideration and will be announced in the near future.

Eye Tests

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the take-up by pensioners in Doncaster, Central of free eye tests after their introduction; and if he will make a statement. [66563]

Mr. Denham: As it is difficult to predict the rate of take-up, an estimate for such a relatively small population would not be meaningful. Nationally, we estimate that, from 1 April 1999, some 6 million to 7 million more people aged 60 and over will become eligible for free National Health Service sight tests and, in 1999–2000, there will be between 2 and 3 million more NHS tests.

ENT Services (West Pennines)

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to announce his decision on the future of ear, nose and throat services in the West Pennine Health Authority area. [66615]

Mr. Denham: We hope to be able to make a decision on this issue in the near future after we have had the opportunity to consider all of the relevant factors.

Dental Services

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was *(a)* the budget and *(b)* the outturn for general dental services for England for the financial year 1997–98. [66654]

Mr. Denham: General dental services (GDS) is not cash limited, so there is no set annual budget. The original vote provision and final expenditure in the GDS in England is shown in the table.

General dental service: 1997–98 expenditure
England

£ million

	Gross expenditure	*Net expenditure*
Provision made in main Estimate	1,405.8	1,021.5
Outturn	1,349.3	959.1

Gross expenditure includes all fees and allowances payable to general dental practitioners, which cover their income and practice expenses, together with supplementary cost such as employers' superannuation contributions, payments of salaried dentists who provide GDS care in certain localities, and refunds to patients who incorrectly paid dental charges. Net expenditure shows costs after taking into account all dental charges collected from patients.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will list for each health authority area *(a)* the number of applications received and *(b)* the gross funding awarded under Investing in Dentistry; and if he will make a statement; [66658]

(2) how much money has been allocated to Investing in Dentistry up to 31 December; which health authority areas applied for such funds; how much each has bid for; and how many applications were *(a)* received and *(b)* successful in each health authority area. [66659]

Mr. Denham: Since the "Investing in Dentistry" initiative was announced in September 1987, 614 applications have been received and grants totalling nearly £7 million have been approved. The table gives details of the health authorities who submitted "Investing in Dentistry" funding requests to my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State in 1997–98 and 1998–99, the number of applications submitted, the gross amount of funding requested, the number of applications approved and gross funding awarded.

Investing in dentistry requests by health authority

Health authority	*Number of applications submitted*	*Number of applications approved*	*Gross funding awarded* £	*Gross funding requested* £
Avon	12	4	81,000	428,100
Barnet	6	—	—	214,900
Barnsley	5	3	72,900	124,200
Bedfordshire	2	2	30,000	30,000
Berkshire	12	5	85,000	385,000
Bexley and Greenwich	3	—	—	396,000

Investing in dentistry requests by health authority

Health authority	Number of applications submitted	Number of applications approved	Gross funding awarded £	Gross funding requested £
Birmingham	2	1	57,000	76,700
Bradford	4	1	52,700	354,300
Bury and Rochdale	2	—	—	33,100
Calderdale and Kirklees	4	—	—	240,700
Cambridge and Huntingdon	5	4	127,400	396,400
Camden and Islington	2	—	—	100,000
City and East London	8	5	164,000	290,800
Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly	13	7	251,800	990,600
County Durham	10	3	110,000	332,900
Coventry	1	—	—	49,000
Doncaster	5	2	32,900	119,400
Dorset	5	2	29,500	101,600
Dudley	1	—	—	39,500
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	9	6	112,600	155,000
East Kent	4	—	—	518,400
East Lancashire	15	1	44,000	605,600
East Norfolk	6	3	96,000	453,800
East Riding	13	6	184,500	423,000
East Sussex	3	—	—	60,000
Enfield and Haringay	8	—	—	197,000
Gloucestershire	20	10	172,000	645,800
Herefordshire	2	2	50,000	60,000
Isle of Wight	3	2	85,000	165,000
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	18	—	—	267,000
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	7	2	77,700	207,000
Leeds	4	—	—	557,300
Leicestershire	5	2	29,300	162,100
Lincolnshire	2	2	117,000	130,000
Liverpool	2	1	96,000	147,100
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	5	2	34,900	95,800
Morecambe Bay	10	6	137,000	226,500
Newcastle and North Tyneside	7	2	67,400	240,300
Northamptonshire	7	4	50,000	90,000
North Cheshire	1	1	50,000	50,000
North Cumbria	14	6	206,600	309,300
North Derbyshire	2	1	60,400	60,400
North and East Devon	8	7	218,300	346,300
North Essex	2	2	37,400	38,400
North and Mid Hampshire	21	7	185,200	658,600
North Staffordshire	10	6	168,800	276,500
North West Lancashire	7	5	161,800	311,700
North Yorkshire	30	8	194,400	550,900
North West Anglia	4	—	—	90,000
Nottingham	7	2	35,700	222,800
Oxfordshire	8	6	222,000	242,000
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	18	8	170,500	719,400
Redbridge and Waltham Forest	6	4	57,700	209,700
Rotherham	10	6	141,500	312,700
Salford and Trafford	2	2	22,300	22,300
Sandwell	8	—	—	151,000
Sefton	1	—	—	48,500
St Helens and Knowsley	7	3	80,000	162,100
Shropshire	12	7	221,000	457,000
Solihull	1	—	—	22,000
Somerset	18	5	132,000	722,200
Southern Derbyshire	4	1	12,000	116,600
South Cheshire	10	7	155,700	303,500
South Essex	5	1	40,000	45,000
South Humber	3	2	59,000	83,000
South Lancashire	5	1	23,300	187,400
South Staffordshire	7	2	55,000	143,000
South West Devon	12	8	213,700	359,300
Southampton and South West Hampshire	18	9	306,200	918,800
Stockport	1	—	—	14,000
Suffolk	6	6	109,000	124,000
Sunderland	6	—	—	207,600
Tees	3	—	—	146,900
Walsall	3	—	—	100,500
Warwickshire	1	—	—	154,000
West Hertfordshire	2	1	40,000	107,900
West Kent	3	2	80,200	102,200

Investing in dentistry requests by health authority

Health authority	*Number of applications submitted*	*Number of applications approved*	*Gross funding awarded* £	*Gross funding requested* £
West Surrey	9	4	168,100	902,600
West Sussex	31	5	90,616	783,600
Wigan and Bolton	4	1	63,200	194,000
Wiltshire	20	14	584,800	1,128,600
Wirral	5	—	—	123,000
Wolverhampton	4	1	50,000	132,500
Worcestershire	3	1	40,000	232,000

Notes:
1. Gross funding figures have been rounded up to the nearest hundred pounds.
2. Some gross funding requested figures may be inflated due to the inclusion of revised or re-submitted applications.

Primary Care Groups

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what plans he has to appoint a pharmacist to membership of each primary care group; [66657]

(2) when primary care groups will have their membership expanded to include a community optician. [66656]

Mr. Denham: Pharmacists and opticians are recognised as important stakeholders in the community and primary care group boards have the power to co-opt them onto the board so as to make proper use of their skills and knowledge, but we do not intend to require a pharmacist or optician member on all boards.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received from community health councils regarding the composition of primary care groups. [66652]

Mr. Denham: The Association of Community Health Councils for England and Wales has been involved with discussions about the establishment of primary care groups since February 1998.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reasons dentists were excluded from the membership of primary care groups. [66655]

Mr. Denham: Dentists are not excluded from primary care groups. Dentists are recognised as important stakeholders in the community and primary care group boards have the power to co-opt them onto the board so as to make proper use of their skills and knowledge, but we do not intend to require a dentist member on all boards.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 18 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns *381–82*, what estimate he has made of the annual number of general practitioner appointments with patients which will have to be covered by either locum GPs or other GPs within the practices, as a result of GP participation in the administration of primary care groups. [67253]

Mr. Denham: We have put in place a framework of allowances for primary care group board members that enables general practitioner practices to claim locum costs to cover the absence on PCG business of a member of the practice. The number of GP appointments that may have to be covered by either locum GPs or other GPs within the practices as a result of GP participation in the administration of PCGs is entirely dependent upon how each of the 481 PCG boards organises its business and to what degree that business is conducted within individual GPs' surgery hours.

Nurse Education

Mr. Hesford: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has for improvements to nurse education and training. [66864]

Mr. Denham: We want to see nurse education become more accessible and provide nurses with the practical skills they need when they enter the National Health Service. We will be discussing how we achieve this with representatives of the professions and the universities, and with Sir Len Peach, Chair of the United Kingdom Central Council Commission for Education. The commission is reviewing nurse education and will report in the summer.

Loyalty Bonuses

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will introduce a loyalty bonus pay scheme for years of service accrued in the National Health Service? [66927]

Mr. Denham: We want to see a fair and modern pay system in the National Health Service. We intend to publish proposals for achieving pay reform in the spring.

Residential Care Workers

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his oral statement to the House on 5 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns 1011–13, what assessment he has made of the call for a comprehensive system of training and qualification for all residential care workers contained in the Residential Forum's report, "A Golden Opportunity". [66814]

Mr. Hutton: We are working to reshape training for residential child care staff in the context of the White Paper Modernising Social Services and as an integral part of our Quality Protects programme. To achieve our aims, we shall work in partnership with employment, users, professional and education interests in order that the best possible training opportunities may be provided for these staff. We have already begun this work through a series of initiatives reviewing the content of professional social work training, investing in new post qualifying training specifically for child care to be delivered in centres of excellence and by funding training to National Vocational Qualifications level 3 for other residential child care staff.

We see residential child care work as being firmly rooted in the values and ethos of social work and we intend to continue this as the basis of training for staff who deal with damaged and vulnerable children.

Multiple Sclerosis

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he *(a)* is taking and *(b)* intends to take to ensure that the guidelines set out in EL 95/97 for choosing those MS patients suitable for treatments with beta interferon are consistently implemented. [66740]

Ms Jowell: Most health authorities now have procedures in place by which suitable patients with relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis can receive treatment with beta interferon. However, consideration is being given to the possible need for further guidance, in the light of continuing debate about the clinical and cost effectiveness of beta interferon.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients with MS were prescribed Azathiopine between 1995 and 1998. [66856]

Ms Jowell: The information requested is not available. 1,024,500 National Health Service prescriptions for Azathioprine were dispensed in the community in England between 1995 and 1997 (1998 data are not yet available), but hospital dispensing data, and information on medical conditions for which the drug was prescribed, and the numbers of patients for whom it was prescribed are not held centrally.

Care Pathways

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to issue guidance on the provision of care pathways for patients with long-term medical conditions. [66874]

Mr. Hutton: There are no plans at present to issue guidance on care pathways for patients with long-term care conditions.

The Health Select Committee in its investigation into the relationship between health and social services has recommended that the Department draw up user pathways for a comprehensive range of conditions and services.

The Department is currently reviewing all recommendations set out the Committee's report on the relationship between health and social services and will be responding in due course.

Local Deprivation Indicators

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which measures of local deprivation his Department and its agencies use in considering allocation of funds to local projects. [66724]

Mr. Hutton: The Department provides project funding to a range of voluntary organisations through a number of grant schemes. Decisions about which projects to fund are made, essentially, by referral to the aims and strengths of the individual applications and how each one relates to the Department's aims and objectives. The extent to which a project grant would have an impact on local deprivation would be considered alongside all the other aspects, and the particular circumstances, of that specific project.

Aldehydes

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when the Committee on the Medical Effects of Air Pollutants plans to consider aldehydes; and if he will make a statement; [66728]

(2) what further action he plans to take to reduce levels of aldehydes in ambient air; and what plans he has for further research into their sources. [66713]

Ms Jowell: This Department's Committee on the Medical Effects of Air Pollutants will be examining the health effects of aldehydes as part of its on-going review of pollutants, probably towards the end of 1999. The committee's advice will determine whether further research is appropriate, including the further identification of sources.

We understand that there is no detailed inventory of the sources of formaldehyde emissions in the United Kingdom. However, road vehicles are likely to be a significant source, particularly in built-up areas. Action taken to implement new European legislation to reduce emissions from new passenger cars and light duty vans in 2000 and 2005 is likely to reduce emissions of hydrocarbons (including aldehydes) from road transport. Further changes to improve fuel quality from 2000 and 2005 are also expected to reduce significantly the level of noxious emissions from the existing vehicle fleet.

Operating Department Practitioners

Mr. Shaw: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will assess the *(a)* benefits and *(b)* disadvantages of regulating operating department practitioners. [66877]

Mr. Denham: This is a matter for the profession.

Housing

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what appraisal he has made of the incidence and cost of ill-health currently attributable to poor ventilation and condensation in the housing stock. [66884]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 21 January 1999]:* We recognise the very important links between poor housing and ill health. That is why Ministerial colleagues within the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions have released substantial additional resources for housing, regeneration and energy efficiency measures. Additional Government action to tackle poverty, unemployment and unhealthy lifestyles will also play a key role.

Significant risks to health arise from cold and damp conditions. Those likely to be most affected are often the most vulnerable in society: the old, the very young, the disabled and those living on low incomes. The main health outcomes are respiratory diseases, such as asthma and bronchitis and cardiovascular diseases, as well as accidents and mental health.

The Department and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions are jointly funding a £1 million research programme over 3 years. This programme, "The effects on health of exposure to air pollutants and damp in the home", is focusing on indoor air pollution and its effects on health. The effects on sensitive individuals in the population, interactions

between indoor air pollutants and the health effects of damp, including respiratory disease and asthma, as well as ventilation and the relationship between indoor and outdoor pollutants, are main focuses of the studies.

Health Action Zones are targetting special effort in areas of deprivation to develop new approaches to improving health and services and a number of these are working to improve housing and energy efficiency in poor homes. From April this year, all health authorities will begin developing local health improvement programmes in partnership with local National Health Service bodies and local authorities to achieve improvements in health. Housing will be a key area where these bodies can work together to improve the health of local communities.

Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what research has been commissioned into the incidence of carbon monoxide poisoning caused by long-term exposure to poorly-ventilated domestic gas appliances; [65329]

(2) what assessment he has made of the level of awareness among general practitioners of the incidence of carbon monoxide poisoning from poorly-ventilated domestic gas appliances and the medical symptoms of long-term exposure to low levels of carbon monoxide. [65330]

Ms Jowell: *[holding answer 21 January 1999]:* Carbon Monoxide (CO) poisoning causes 50 accidental deaths and nearly 200 serious injuries in the United Kingdom each year and is still a significant public health issue. First, we welcome the Department of Trade and Industry's recent campaign "Carbon Monoxide Can Kill—Keep Your Family Safe". This campaign will help to raise the awareness of the dangers of CO to those made at risk.

The Chief Medical Officer (CMO) has regularly reminded all doctors over the last two years, through his update, of the importance of identifying cases of CO poisoning. To reinforce the message even further and more widely the CMO and Chief Nursing Officer (CNO) published a letter "Carbon Monoxide: The Forgotten Killer" in September last year, which provided the most up-to-date information about CO to community nurses, midwives, health visitors, general practitioners and other health professionals. In particular, health professionals were reminded about the similarity of the symptoms of long-term exposure to lower levels of CO to food poisoning and influenza.

This Department, in association with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, is currently funding a £1 million joint research programme about the effects of exposure to air pollutants and damp in the home. Three of these research projects specifically address CO exposure.

A major three-year Department of Health/Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions £3 million research programme, which focused mainly on outdoor pollutants, is coming to an end shortly and decisions will be taken shortly on future research funding. One priority area will be CO poisoning in the home.

Stroke Care

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what rights stroke victims or their relatives have to insist on patients' treatment in specialist stroke units; [66837]

(2) if he will make a statement on national implementation plans for stroke care. [66839]

Mr. Hutton: Following a stroke patients are entitled to expect that an appropriate service will be provided, but that service will not necessarily be within a specialist stroke unit. The organisation of health authorities services, including those for people who have had a stroke, and the manner in which they are delivered are matters for the health authority, taking account of the needs of the local population and the priorities set for the use of the available resources.

In the recent guidance which we issued on "Commissioning in the New NHS" in October 1998 the importance of care pathways was stressed. Our proposals for "Pathways" of care will link primary care, secondary care and social care where appropriate. We emphasised in this guidance that care pathways would be developed to cover a range of preventative diagnostic, palliative, rehabilitative and supporting caring components of an integrated programme of care. The care and treatments of patients with stroke provides an example of how care pathways can work in practice.

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what (1) is his estimate of *(a)* the amount of money and *(b)* the percentage of the NHS budget spent annually over the last five years on stroke treatment and rehabilitation; [66838]

(2) how many stroke patients were treated in the NHS outside specialist stroke units in the last year for which figures are available; [66840]

(3) how many specialist stroke units there are and how many patients were treated in them in the last year for which figures are available; [66841]

(4) what is his estimate of the effectiveness of specialist stroke units. [66842]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is not available. The organisation of health services, including services for people who have had a stroke, and the manner in which they are delivered are matters for the health authority, taking account of the needs of the local population and the priorities set for the use of the available resources.

Cardiac Disease (Hospital Waiting Times)

Mr. Collins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what targets he has set for the maximum possible waiting time for operations to deal with life-threatening cardiac conditions. [67015]

Mr. Denham: We have set no new targets for maximum waiting times for operations to deal with life-threatening cardiac conditions. However, an external reference group is currently working with the Department of Health to develop a national service framework covering all aspects of National Health Service care for people with coronary heart disease.

Bone Marrow Transplants

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many registered bone marrow donors there are; [67134]

(2) what is the average cost of a bone marrow transplant; [67133]

(3) how many people are currently waiting for bone marrow transplants. [67135]

Mr. Hutton: According to the recently published "New NHS 1998 Reference Costs" the average unit cost of a bone marrow graft is £10,600.

There are approximately 381,000 potential bone marrow donors registered currently on the two bone marrow registers operating in England. The British bone marrow register holds around 91,000 names and the Anthony Nolan Bone Marrow Trust has approaching 290,000.

Figures for the number of people currently waiting for a bone marrow transplant are not kept centrally.

Shopmobility Schemes

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what financial support his Department is providing to shopmobility schemes in the current financial year. [67144]

Mr. Hutton: The National Federation of Shopmobility, which is the umbrella body for local shopmobility schemes, is not receiving any financial support under Section 64 of the Health Services and Public Health Act 1968 during the current financial year from the Department. The National Federation of Shopmobility has submitted two applications under the Section 64 grant scheme for the financial year commencing 1 April 1999 and these are currently under consideration.

SCOTLAND

Glasgow City Council

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what form of financial support has been made by the Scottish Office to Glasgow City Council to pay for a feasibility study into its proposed mass stock transfer initiative. [63324]

Mr. Macdonald *[holding answer 10 December 1998]:* Glasgow City Council has been granted consent to borrow £1.065 million in order to undertake feasibility work under the new housing partnerships initiative. Loan charges support for this borrowing will be available from The Scottish Office.

Commercial Lobbyists

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what rules or guidance his Department has to govern the *(a)* formal and *(b)* informal interaction between his civil servants and commercial lobbyists. [66206]

Mr. Dewar: I refer the hon. Member to the reply my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister gave my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) on 27 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *4*.

Hunterston B Nuclear Plant

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the emergency declared at the Hunterston B nuclear plant on 27 December. [66426]

Mr. Dewar: In order to operate their cooling systems all nuclear power stations need access to either the Grid or to their own power sources. As a result of the severe weather that affected the West of Scotland on 26–27 December 1998 connection to all 4 power Grid lines to Hunterston B was lost shortly after midnight. Staff safely shut down both the reactors at Hunterston B. Back-up generators were activated automatically to prevent overheating.

The generators were shut down when the Grid connection was restored. However, they did not restart automatically when the Grid connection was lost for a second time. An on-site emergency was declared early on the morning of 27 December. Management at the station took that decision to ensure that additional technical staffing resources were available to deal with the on-site consequences of the power loss as rapidly as possible. By this time the reactors had been safely shut down for nearly 11 hours. There was no damage to, or release of radioactivity from the plant.

Health and Safety Executive (HSE) inspectors are investigating the incident and will report on it in

their Quarterly Statement of Nuclear Incidents at Nuclear Installations; and

their report to the Local Community Liaison Committee.

I have asked HSE to send copies of these documents to my hon. Friend when they are published.

Drugs

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list for each project of over £10,000 the programmes funded by (i) Scotland Against Drugs and (ii) the Drugs Challenge Fund in 1997–98 indicating the programmes of over £10,000 which have been commissioned under these headings in financial years 1998–99 and 1999–2000; what is the total proposed budget for *(a)* SAD and *(b)* the Drugs Challenge Fund for each of the next three financial years; what are the running costs; and what percentage of total funds will be under the control of the Scottish Parliament. [65939]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* Funding of £1 million per annum has been made available to Scotland Against Drugs, including £0.5 million for the Drugs Challenge Fund for the years 1998–99 to 2000–01. Running costs for this financial year are estimated at £0.250 million. These funds will come under the control of the Scottish Parliament.

Information on programmes over £10,000 is set out in the tables.

(i) Scotland against drugs

£

Programme	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
National Drug Awareness Week Activity/Promotion	115,942	—	—
Young People's Programme			
Primary School Project	40,038	—	—
Youth Action Fund	80,550	—	—
SFA Partnership Project	71,768	—	—
Concession Card	190,314	—	—
Young Scot Activities	25,438	—	—
Youth Events	14,801	—	—
Media Strategy	389,408	—	—
Total	812,317	—	—
Adult/Parent Programme			
Adult/Parent Programme	178,637	—	—
Adult/Media Strategy	608,770	—	—
Total	787,407	—	—
Business/Commerce Programme			
Business Support	7,275	—	—
Education in the Workplace	66,937	—	—
Total	74,212	—	—
Public Relations			
Communications Strategy	—	[1]19,000	[2]—
Young People Programme			
Primary School Initiative	—	[1]130,000	[2]—
Adult/Parent Programme			
Drugs in the Workplace	—	[1]131,000	[2]—

[1] Estimated out-turn

[2] Uncommitted

(ii) Scottish drugs challenge fund

£

Project	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*[1]1999–2000*
Glasgow City Council Parks and Recreation Department	14,000	—	—
Govan Initiative Ltd	10,146	—	—
Enhance RDP (Turning point)	34,133	—	—
Queen of the South FC	10,200	—	—
Motherwell Athletics Club	52,700	—	—
Renfrewshire Council	11,400	—	—
Evening Times	40,000	—	—
Health Promotions—Grampian Health Board	50,000	—	—
Friends of Craigmillar	20,667	—	—
Paisley Partnership	11,050	—	—
Drumchapel Community Drugs Forum	10,000	—	—
North Lanarkshire Council Education Department	16,000	—	—
Drumchapel Adventure Group	12,940	—	—
Greater Easterhouse Development Co Ltd.	17,000	—	—
Fablevision	32,000	—	—
Calton Athletic Recovery Group	50,000		—
Lanark Road Project	11,136	—	—
Govan Youth Access Project	10,500	—	—
Forfar Drugs Initiative Group	23,000	—	—
Drumchapel Adventure Group	—	14,000	33,110
Evening Times	—	5,000	45,000
Drumchapel Drugs Forum	—	5,000	12,200
Simpson House	—	11,120	11,125
Renfrewshire Council Education and Leisure Services	—	6,000	13,984
Mayfield and Easthouses Manse Project	—	25,350	—
Renfrewshire Council Social Work Department	—	25,440	—
Central Scotland NHS Trust Community Addiction	—	14,481	—
Media Education	—	12,750	12,755
Masurick Youth Café	—	26,000	—
Community Athletics 2000	—	41,000	—
Govan Youth Access Project	—	10,000	—
Tayside Police	—	20,000	—
South Lanarkshire Council	—	26,666	—
Tayside Police	—	7,333	7,333
Scottish Football Association	—	50,000	—
Health Promotion, Grampian Health Board	—	50,000	—
Fablevision	—	34,150	—
Renfrewshire Council	—	11,200	—
Friends of Craigmillar	—	20,775	11,600
Glasgow City Council Cultural and Leisure Services	—	28,280	—

[1] Committed

Rough Sleepers Initiative

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will provide a breakdown of all allocations of money over £10,000 made under the rough sleepers initiative in the financial year 1997–98 indicating allocations over £10,000 already made under the initiative for financial years 1998–99 and 1999–2000; what is the total available under the initiative for each of the next three financial years; and what percentage of this will be under the control of the Scottish Parliament. [65953]

Mr. Macdonald *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The breakdown of allocations of over £10,000 made under the Rough Sleepers Initiative on 1997–98 and 1998–99, including allocations for the year 1999–2000, was as follows:

£

Local authority	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*Total*
Aberdeen City Council	—	232,184	308,482	540,666
Dundee City Council	70,313	249,812	586,625	906,750
East Lothian Council	20,000	56,526	169,579	246,105
East and West Dunbartonshire Councils	—	11,200	34,300	45,500
City of Edinburgh Council	821,000	2,379,328	1,590,880	4,791,208
Falkirk Council	—	—	522,300	522,300
Fife Council	141,535	118,330	170,666	430,531
Glasgow City Council	1,072,900	2,223,700	2,353,300	5,649,900
Highland Council	16,700	16,800	—	33,500
Inverclyde Council	13,600	33,500	34,300	81,400
Moray Council	14,600	49,745	280,380	344,725
North and South Ayrshire Councils	15,000	46,100	218,250	279,350
North Lanarkshire Council	16,800	257,497	526,813	801,110

£

Local authority	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	Total
Perth and Kinross Council	137,000	318,162	354,351	809,513
Renfrewshire Council	10,100	24,800	134,925	169,825
South Lanarkshire Council	16,600	67,640	73,580	157,820
Stirling Council	—	11,650	23,900	35,550
West Lothian Council	—	37,500	37,500	75,000
Glasgow Council for Single Homeless	—	24,334	33,163	57,497

A further £14 million has been identified for the Rough Sleepers Initiative over the 2 years, 2000–01 and 2001–02. All of these funds will come under the control of the Scottish Parliament.

Mental Health Development Fund

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list for each project of over £10,000 the programmes *(a)* funded from the Mental Health Development Fund in 1997–98 and *(b)* commissioned by his Department to be funded from the Mental Health Development Fund in (i) 1998–99 and (ii) 1999–2000; what is the total proposed budget for such projects for each of the next three financial years; and what percentage of this he estimates will be under the control of the Scottish Parliament. [65932]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The first allocation made from the Mental Health Development Fund issued during financial year 1998–99. Awards over £10,000 in that year were as follows:

Health board	Project	1998–99 Funding (£)
Argyll and Clyde	Joint commissioning development project	61,000
	Pilot for jointly appointed manager for combined community mental health team	42,000
	Needs assessment led service development for children and young people with mental disorder in care and on the child protection register	57,000
Dumfries and Galloway	Establishment of co-ordination and support for community health teams	88,000
	User and carer involvement in community care planning	63,000
Fife	Needs led integrated service development	117,000
	Real jobs initiative—employer liaison	10,000
Forth Valley	Shared learning initiative	28,000
Grampian	Joint commissioning manager	50,000
	Community education workers	50,000
	Senior care managers—mental health	75,000
Greater Glasgow	Dementia Glasgow 1999	220,000
	Assessment of mental health needs of homeless population	78,000
	Challenge of change—project 1	78,000
	Challenge of change—project 2	49,000
	Ethnic minorities development worker	22,000
Lanarkshire	Project team approach to mental health needs assessment and user and carer involvement	203,000
Lothian	Housing liaison project	38,000
	Planning for training, education and employment	29,000
	Developing a community sensitive mental health service	44,000
Orkney	Dementia project	12,000

Note:
Invitations have issued for bids for funds for later years

As health related expenditure the Fund will come under the control of the Scottish Parliament.

Crime (Research)

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will provide a breakdown of all allocations of money over £10,000 for research projects into crime, the causes of crime, the prison system, the police or the criminal justice system; if he will give the allocations over £10,000 already made for such research projects for financial years 1998–99 and 1999–2000; if he will give the total funds available for each of the next three financial years for such projects; and what percentage of this will be under the control of the Scottish Parliament. [65812]

Mr. McLeish *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* Research on crime, the causes of crime, the prison system, the police and the criminal justice system is commissioned by The Scottish Office from its criminal law research vote and, in part, from the social work research vote (offender social work services). Funds available from these research votes over the next three years are shown in the following table. From July 1999, these funds will come under the control of the Scottish Parliament.

£

Year	Criminal law research vote	Social work research vote
1999–2000	532,000	150,000
2000–01	532,000	150,000
2001–02	532,000	150,000

Research projects for 1998–99 and 1999–2000 costing over £10,000 are listed in the table.

£000

Research projects	1998–99	1999–2000
Young men and offending	65	—
Young women and offending	8	2
Women offenders	—	60
Evaluation of Freagarrach (President Young Offenders)	13	17
Children Jointly Reported to Reporters and Procurators Fiscal Children's Hearing's Cohort Study (not soley offenders)	—	18
Evaluation of Diversion	30	10
Taking Account of Victims Views	12	—
Social Work and Criminal Justice Programme—Phase 3: Re-conviction of probationers and ex-prisoners	9	5
Evaluation of Supervised Attendance Orders	—	34
Evaluation of Airborne Initiative	—	28
Research To Develop A New Police Standard Entrance Test	36	—
Child Witness Support Initiative	13	—
Intermediate Diets and the Agreement of Evidence	22	9
Evaluation of the Strathclyde Police Witness Protection Pilot Project	17	—
Comparison of Homicide Rates in Scotland, England and Wales	14	—
Evaluation of the Open Doors Programme HMP Barlinnie	20	19
Young Offenders Held in Custody	31	—
Repeat Victimisation	21	3
Evaluation of the Young Offender Mediation	11	—
Evaluation of Electronically Monitored Restriction of Liberty Orders	15	25
Survey of Crimes Against Business in Scotland	46	69
Experience of Violence and Harassment of Gay Men in the City of Edinburgh	11	3

Local Care Partnership Scheme

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will provide a breakdown of all allocations of money over £10,000 made under the Local Care Partnership scheme in the financial year 1997–98; if he will list the allocations over £10,000 already made under this scheme for the financial years 1998–99 and 1999–2000; if he will give *(a)* the amount allocated to running costs and *(b)* the total funds available for each of the next three financial years; and what percentage of this will be under the control of the Scottish Parliament. [65811]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The allocations over £10,000 made from the Local Care Partnership Scheme in financial year 1998–99 were as follows:

£

Health board area/project	1998–99 funding
Argyll and Clyde	
Strategic approach to joint commissioning of addiction services—Joint Development Officer	34,000
Co-operation in Levern Valley	64,000
Rapid response team	51,000
Borders	
Multi agency model for assessment in care management	57,000
Fife	
Integrated assessment care delivery project	66,000
Forth Valley	
Community care joint information system	25,000
Greater Glasgow	
Carewell one stop care shop for older people	48,000
Highland	
Skye support workers scheme	42,000
Inverness and Culloden Project	100,000
Lothian	
Broxburn Challenge Centre Partnership	59,000
Tayside	
Development of care pathways for patients with fractured neck of femur	17,000

Allocations made over £10,000 for financial year 1999–2000 were as follows:

£

Heath board area/project	1999–2000 funding
Borders	
Hitting the targets	51,000
Lanarkshire	
Services for homeless people	55,000

The Scheme did not operate in 1997–98. The Scheme will come under the control of the Scottish Parliament.

Social Inclusion Partnerships

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will provide a breakdown of all allocations of money over £10,000 made under the Social Inclusion Partnerships in the financial year 1997–98; if he will state the allocations over £10,000 already made under this programme for the financial years 1998–99 and 1999–2000; if he will give *(a)* the amount allocated to running costs and *(b)* the total funds available for each of the next three financial years; and what percentage of this will be under the control of the Scottish Parliament. [65808]

Mr. Macdonald *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* No allocations have yet been made to Social Inclusion Partnerships. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced on 13 November that he would allocate

£18 million of the £48 million available over the next 3 years to 3 new Social Inclusion Partnerships in Drumchapel, Greater Pollok and Blantyre/North Hamilton when they submit detailed strategies which demonstrate satisfactorily that they can meet their objectives. They have been asked to do so by 15 February. Further decisions on the designation of Social Inclusion Partnerships have yet to be made.

The funds earmarked for Social Inclusion Partnerships will be included within the Scottish Administration's Assigned Budget and will be subject to decisions of the Scottish Parliament.

Contingency Fund

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is the current amount of his Department's emergency reserve or contingency fund; and what amount he proposes it should be in each of next three financial years. [65813]

Mr. Dewar *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The Scottish Office does not have and has no plans for an emergency reserve or contingency fund. After devolution it will be for the Scottish Parliament to decide whether it wishes to set aside resources for this purpose.

New Opportunities Fund

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will provide a breakdown of projects receiving assistance under the New Opportunities Fund in the current financial year; what funds have already been earmarked *(a)* in total and *(b)* by project where already allocated for the next three financial years; and what percentage will be under the control of the Scottish Parliament. [65796]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* National Lottery funding is not subject to annuality. Current estimates of cash allocations for the first three initiatives over the next four years, and of the percentages allocated for Scottish projects, are as follows:

Initiative	*Total allocation (£ million)*	*Percentage allocation to Scotland*
Healthy Living Centres	300	11.5
ICT training for teachers and librarians	300	10.2
Out of school hours learning and child care	400	11.5

The New Opportunities Fund will be inviting applications under these initiatives over the next few months. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport has also published a consultation paper on three further possible initiatives to be funded by the New Opportunities Fund over the next four years. £400 million is expected to be available for these initiatives, but its division among them and the percentages to be allocated to Scotland have not yet been determined. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland will make an announcement shortly on the involvement of Scottish Ministers in National Lottery distribution after devolution.

Empty Homes Initiative

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will provide a breakdown of all allocations of money over £10,000 made under the Empty Homes Initiative in the financial year 1997–98; if he will give the allocations over £10,000 already made under this programme for financial years 1998–99 and 1999–2000; if he will give *(a)* the amount allocated to running costs and *(b)* the total funds available for each of the next three financial years; and what percentage of this will be under the control of the Scottish Parliament. [65801]

Mr. Macdonald *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The breakdown of allocations of over £10,000 made under the Empty Homes Initiative in 1997–98 and 1998–99 was as follows:

£

Local authority	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*Total*
Aberdeen City Council	—	45,610	45,610
Aberdeenshire Council	31,066	544,000	575,066
Angus Council	—	30,000	30,000
Argyll & Bute Council	—	30,000	30,000
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar	28,000	40,000	68,000
Dumfries and Galloway Council	—	55,000	55,000
Dundee City Council	—	30,027	30,027
East Ayrshire Council	58,000	156,400	214,400
East Lothian Council	—	65,000	65,000
East Renfrewshire Council	—	77,092	77,092
City of Edinburgh Council	254,980	1,249,050	1,504,030
Falkirk Council	140,000	192,000	332,000
Fife Council	—	29,000	29,000
Glasgow City Council	627,332	1,603,860	2,231,192
Highland Council	127,100	461,074	588,174
Inverclyde Council	—	22,588	22,588
Moray Council	15,000	169,500	184,500
North Ayrshire Council	—	141,300	141,300
North Lanarkshire Council	348,322	305,371	653,693
Perth & Kinross Council	—	20,000	20,000
Scottish Borders Council	64,000	674,873	738,873
Shetlands Islands Council	10,700	51,100	61,800
South Ayrshire Council	—	27,500	27,500
South Lanarkshire Council	—	168,470	168,470
Stirling Council	140,000	230,000	370,000
West Dunbartonshire Council	30,000	149,000	179,000
West Lothian Council	110,000	425,000	535,000

The running costs associated with the Empty Homes Initiative are covered within the Scottish Office administration budget. Over the next three financial years, 1999–2000, 2000–01 and 2001–02, a further sum of up to £15 million has been identified for the Initiative and local authorities have been asked to submit proposals by 12 February. All Empty Homes Initiative funds will come under the control of the Scottish Parliament.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many applications have been received to date under the Empty Homes Initiative broken down by *(a)* council and *(b)* amount. [66267]

Mr. Macdonald: Thirty-one local authorities have applied to date for funding through the Empty Homes Initiative. The applications, broken down by council and amount, are as follows:

£

Local authority	Applications for funding in 1997–98	Applications for funding in 1998–99
Aberdeen City Council	13,000	788,010
Aberdeenshire Council	103,766	592,200
Angus Council	38,500	130,000
Argyll & Bute Council	30,000	30,000
Clackmannanshire Council	—	500,000
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar	120,250	92,500
Dumfries & Galloway Council	—	55,000
Dundee City Council	—	112,258
East Ayrshire Council	734,279	956,400
East Dunbartonshire Council	—	350,000
East Lothian Council	57,000	65,000
East Renfrewshire Council	30,000	77,092
City of Edinburgh Council	717,857	2,582,250
Falkirk Council	140,000	192,000
Fife Council	35,000	183,208
Glasgow City Council	2,016,000	6,530,647
Highland Council	266,045	573,074
Inverclyde Council	—	163,588
Midlothian Council	151,200	151,200
Moray Council	15,000	193,827
North Ayrshire Council	—	441,300
North Lanarkshire Council	598,322	900,262
Perth & Kinross Council	—	20,000
Renfrewshire Council	396,000	648,000
Scottish Borders Council	188,400	1,054,873
Shetland Islands Council	10,700	211,200
South Ayrshire Council	94,900	94,750
South Lanarkshire Council	410,500	239,352
Stirling Council	200,000	230,000
West Dunbartonshire Council	30,000	409,000
West Lothian Council	215,000	525,000
Total	6,611,719	19,091,991

Sixteen authorities were awarded a total of £2 million for 1997–98 and 27 authorities were awarded a total of £7 million for 1998–99. In November 1998 local authorities were invited to submit applications by 12 February 1999 for funding in the three years from 1999–2000 to 2001–02.

From 1 July 1999 the Empty Homes Initiative will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Challenge Fund

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will provide a breakdown of allocations of money over £10,000 made from the Challenge Fund in the financial year 1997–98, indicating allocations over £10,000 already made from the fund for financial years 1998–99 and 1999–2000; what is the total available under the fund for each of the next three financial years; and what percentage of this will be under the control of the Scottish Parliament. [65952]

Mr. McLeish *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The information is set out in the tables. The allocations shown are fully committed for those projects that were successful in the 1997–98 Central Challenge Fund and the 1997–98 and 1998–99 Transport Challenge Funds. These resources will come under the control of the Scottish Parliament.

(a) Central Challenge Fund

£000

Authority	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	Financial year 2001–02
Angus	2,613	1,705	854	—	—
Aberdeenshire	1,701	1,500	199	—	—
Clackmannanshire	310	210	—	—	—
Dumfries and Galloway	700	1,175	—	—	—
East Ayrshire	1,520	910	—	—	—
East Dunbartonshire	185	—	—	—	—
East Renfrewshire	300	200	—	—	—
Edinburgh, City of	2,935	1,416	2,649	—	—
Eilean Siar	800	1,200	1,200	650	—
Glasgow City	1,076	1,842	1,488	157	99
Moray	100	700	200	—	—
North Lanarkshire	500	1,000	2,300	—	—
Perth and Kinross	0	4,400	8,100	3,600	380
South Ayrshire	375	503	—	—	—
West Dumbartonshire	127	173	158	—	—
West Lothian	1,646	1,898	1,888	—	—
Total	14,888	18,832	19,036	4,407	479

Note:

The figures describe original awards which, due to slippage and other factors, are subject to change

Source:

Scottish Office Development Department

(b) Transport Challenge Fund

£000

Authority	Financial year 1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000
Aberdeen City	—	2,400	2,900
Angus	1,000	1,000	—
Argyll and Bute	3,000	—	—
East Renfrewshire	—	800	1,700
Edinburgh, City of	4,000	7,200	5,000
Falkirk	—	500	2,500
Fife	—	900	1,800
Highland	3,000	—	—
Midlothian	—	1,000	1,500
Scottish Borders	4,000	2,500	—
South Lanarkshire	—	500	2,000
Stirling	—	1,200	2,800
SPTA	—	800	4,200
Total	15,000	18,800	24,400

Note:

1. The figures describe original awards which, due to slippage and other factors, are subject to change.
2. There are no Transport Challenge Fund awards due in 2000–01 or 2001–02.

Source:

Scottish Office Development Department

Non-custodial Offenders

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will provide a break-down of all allocations of money over £10,000 made under the non-custodial offenders services scheme in the financial year 1997–98; if he will give the allocations over £10,000 already made under this scheme for the financial years 1998–99 and 1999–2000; if he will give *(a)* the amount allocated to running costs and *(b)* the total funds available for each of the next three financial years; and what percentage of this will be under the control of the Scottish Parliament. [65795]

Mr. McLeish *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The table shows the allocation of grants made to local authorities in 1997–98 and 1998–99 by Central Government for the provision of criminal justice social work services. Allocation of grant for 1999–2000 has yet to be made. Most of the grant allocated to authorities is used for revenue funding: the capital element is very small. The total funds available for criminal justice social work services in 1999–2000, 2000–01 and 2001–02 are £40.8 million, £42.8 million, and £44 million respectively. All of the funding for criminal justice social work will come under the control of the Scottish Parliament.

£

Local authority	1997–98	1998–99
Aberdeen City	2,120,749	2,064,735
Aberdeenshire	720,000	701,792
Angus	715,793	749,043
Argyll and Bute	347,081	354,366
City of Dundee	1,528,586	1,737,279
City of Edinburgh	3,349,954	3,363,637
City of Glasgow	5,739,105	6,548,835
Clackmannan	259,400	297,600
Dumfries and Galloway	1,022,100	1,018,698
East Ayrshire	791,360	769,660
East Dunbarton	382,000	348,250
East Lothian	455,888	429,964
East Renfrew	416,100	361,089
Falkirk	710,000	800,480
Fife	2,321,795	2,315,582
Highland	1,493,500	1,412,500
Inverclyde	751,100	836,723
Midlothian	383,089	383,477
Moray	346,000	352,396
North Ayrshire	882,260	828,800
North Lanark	1,740,883	1,803,563
Orkney Islands	357,293	324,454
Perth and Kinross	759,604	811,645
Renfrewshire	994,813	1,054,990
Scottish Borders	577,500	577,750
Shetland Islands	214,980	199,747
South Ayrshire	595,231	608,841
South Lanark	2,005,304	2,060,594
Stirling	590,050	613,580
West Dunbarton	668,381	714,413
West Lothian	811,469	784,627
Western Isles	135,276	108,043
Totals	34,186,644	35,337,153

Millennium Festival Fund

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list those projects which have been allocated funding from the Millennium Festival Fund *(a)* in the current financial year, *(b)* for 1999–2000 and *(c)* for 2000–01; what is the total moneys available from the fund in each of these years; and what percentage will be under the control of the Scottish Parliament. [65805]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The Millennium Festival Fund has been established to help the nation to celebrate the Millennium. Like other National Lottery expenditure, it is not subject to annuality. Each of the National Lottery distributing bodies operating in Scotland—the Scottish Sports Council, the Scottish Arts Council, the National Lottery Charities Board, the National Heritage Memorial Fund and the Millennium Commission—has contributed towards a Scottish fund of some £10.4 million.

Applications for large grants, over £5,000, were invited in May last year, with a closing date of late October. Details of the successful projects will be announced late next month. A further funding round, aimed at local communities and small organisations seeking grants of £500-£5,000, is expected to be launched shortly. It will be operational until June 2000.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland will shortly make an announcement on the involvement of Scottish Ministers in National Lottery distribution after devolution.

New Deal for Communities

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will provide a breakdown of all allocations of money over £10,000 made under the New Deal for Communities in the financial year 1997–98; if he will give the allocations over £10,000 already made under this programme for financial years 1998–99 and 1999–2000; if he will give *(a)* the amount allocated to running costs and *(b)* the total funds available for each of the next three financial years; and what percentage of this will be under the control of the Scottish Parliament. [65799]

Mr. Macdonald *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The Working for Communities and Listening to Communities programmes were introduced earlier this financial year. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced in May 1998 that two initial pathfinders would be established in Greater Easterhouse (Glasgow) and Wester Hailes (Edinburgh) under the Working for Communities programme; I expect the total cost of the two pathfinders in the current year to be between £250,000 and £300,000. An annual allocation of up to £200,000 is available to support each of the two pathfinders for the following three years.

Funding of £315,000 is being made available to support the development of New Community Schools in this financial year. Funding for this initiative will in future years be made available through the Excellence Fund for Schools.

A total of £3.3 million is available to support the Working for Communities and Listening to Communities programmes in each of the next two financial years, rising to £6.3 million in 2001–02. I have already announced the broad objectives for these two programmes and I expect to make a further announcement on the allocation of funds under these programmes before the end of March.

The running costs associated with the programmes are covered within the Scottish Office administration budget, and the funds earmarked for the Working for Communities and Listening to Communities programmes will come under the control of the Scottish Parliament.

Transport Projects

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the transport projects of over £100,000 for which contracts have been signed which will require public funds in each of the next three financial years; what will be the annual cost of each of these projects for each of the next three financial years; and what percentage of proposed spending on *(a)* road, *(b)* rail, *(c)* air, *(d)* sea and *(e)* other transport for this period has thus been allocated. [65928]

Mr. Macdonald *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The information requested can be obtained only at disproportionate cost. Information on individual contracts entered into by local authorities is not held centrally.

Energy Efficiency

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list for each project of over £10,000 the moneys he has provided to *(a)* local authorities, *(b)* other groups and *(c)* projects commissioned by his Department for energy efficiency projects in (i) 1997–98, (ii) 1998–99 and (iii) 1999–2000; what is the total proposed budget for energy efficiency projects for each of the next three financial years; and what percentage of this will be under the control of the Scottish Parliament. [65937]

Mr. Macdonald *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* In 1997–98 local authorities were allocated £2.5 million to improve the energy efficiency of their housing stock. In 1998–99 the Warm Deal has provided local authorities with £3 million, Home Energy Efficiency Installers with £1.75 million and Scottish Homes with £0.5 million to improve home energy efficiency across all tenures. An extra £1 million has been made available but has not yet been allocated. The budget for the Warm Deal in 1999–2000 will be £6 million. These funds will come under the control of the Scottish Parliament. Local authorities may use other resources for energy efficiency projects but no details are held centrally.

Innovation Fund for Child Health

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will provide a breakdown of all allocations of money over £10,000 made under the Innovation Fund for Child Health in the financial year 1997–98; if he will give the allocations over £10,000 already made under this programme for financial years 1998–99 and 1999–2000; if he will give *(a)* the amount allocated to running costs and *(b)* the total funds available for each of the next three financial years; and what percentage of this will be under the control of the Scottish Parliament. [65814]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* I announced details of the Innovation Fund for children's services in November 1998. No funds have been allocated from the fund for the financial years 1997–98 and 1998–99.

The total amount made available in the next three financial years is as follows:

	£ million
1999–2000	2
2000–01	4
2001–02	3

No funds have been allocated to running costs.

As health related expenditure the Fund will come under the control of the Scottish Parliament.

Child Care Projects

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will provide a breakdown by *(a)* local authority and *(b)* policy objective of the money made available for child care projects in financial years 1992–93 to 1997–98; what money has been allocated for child care by policy heading and local authority in financial years 1998–99 and 1999–2000; what are the proposed total amounts to be made available for child care over each of the next three financial years; and what percentage of this will be under the control of the Scottish Parliament. [65927]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* Grant Aided Expenditure (GAE) for children's services provided by local authorities for the years 1992–93 to 1999–2000 is shown in Table 1. It is for authorities to determine the proportion that may be spent on child care projects.

In addition to this funding, following the publication of the Green Paper "Meeting the Childcare Challenge: a Childcare Strategy for Scotland" (Cm 3958) an additional £4.7 million has been made available in 1998–99 to develop and support child care generally. Of this, £3.8 million was allocated to local authorities. The breakdown by authority is given in Table 2. Also in

1998–99, an extra £515,000 was allocated to Scottish Enterprise and £50,000 to Highland and Islands Enterprise to support the child care strategy.

Following the Comprehensive Spending Review, a further £49 million will be available over the three year period covering 1999–2000 to 2001–02 to support implementation of the child care strategy. £33 million of this will be allocated to local authorities: £5.75 million in 1999–2000, £13.75 million in 2000–01, and £13.75 million in 2001–02. In addition, £42 million will be made available to local authorities over 1999–2002 to expand support for families with very young children in areas of greatest need: £9 million in 1999–2000, £14 million in 2000–01, and £19 million in 2001–02. The breakdown of funding by authority for 1999–2000 is given in Columns 1 and 2 of Table 3. Decisions on allocations of funding to individual authorities in later years will be taken in due course.

A new Children's Services Development Fund totalling £36.7 million over 3 years from 1999–2000 was announced in November last year. The Fund will help provide improved advocacy for children, extension of fostering services and expansion of support for families with very young children. The first year allocations are set out in Column 3 of Table 3. Allocations for later years will be determined in due course.

This funding will come under the control of the Scottish Parliament.

Table 1: Services for children

GAE £000

Local authority	1992–93	1993–94	1994–95	1995–96
Borders	1,956	1,959	2,295	2,003
Central	9,134	6,258	10,959	14,798
Dumfries and Galloway	3,554	3,886	4,535	4,143
Fife	10,028	9,847	12,534	12,055
Grampian	16,430	15,300	15,689	12,224
Highland	5,532	5,555	6,342	6,679
Lothian	27,240	27,535	30,855	29,198
Strathclyde	114,053	110,928	119,404	106,520
Tayside	14,514	14,649	14,858	14,023
Orkney	319	316	355	405
Shetland	414	586	461	414
Western Isles	631	614	624	642

Table 1 (continued): Services for children

GAE £000

Local authority	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000
Aberdeen City	6,716	6,405	6,824	7,082
Aberdeenshire	3,765	4,040	2,998	2,942
Angus	2,683	2,575	2,542	2,644
Argyll and Bute	2,555	2,528	2,362	2,300
Clackmannanshire	1,727	1,729	1,708	1,799
Dumfries and Galloway	3,788	3,905	3,767	4,215
Dundee City	7,475	7,510	8,475	8,519
East Ayrshire	4,793	4,960	4,993	5,232
East Dunbartonshire	2,434	2,107	1,852	1,529
East Lothian	2,444	2,472	1,957	2,375
East Renfrewshire	1,837	1,991	1,757	1,624
Edinburgh, City of	17,602	17,894	18,758	17,313
Eilean Siar	628	609	480	499
Falkirk	4,914	4,682	5,058	5,325
Fife	10,652	11,460	11,634	11,964
Glasgow City	44,264	44,182	46,873	48,385
Highland	6,204	6,048	5,449	5,769
Inverclyde	4,428	4,145	4,661	4,472
Midlothian	2,333	2,532	2,814	2,779
Moray	1,677	1,958	1,617	1,544

Table 1 (continued): Services for children

GAE £000

Local authority	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000
North Ayrshire	6,545	6,215	6,534	7,075
North Lanarkshire	13,495	13,754	14,000	14,877
Orkney Islands	275	275	237	242
Perthshire and Kinross	2,814	2,989	2,915	2,949
Renfrewshire	7,462	7,842	7,772	7,863
Scottish Borders	2,016	2,229	2,043	1,931
Shetland Islands	338	330	301	295
South Ayrshire	3,265	3,389	3,422	3,187
South Lanarkshire	10,032	9,969	10,164	9,960
Stirling	2,554	2,401	2,460	2,553
West Dunbartonshire	5,466	5,410	6,035	6,150
West Lothian	5,610	6,498	6,725	6,334

Table 2: Additional money available in 1998–99 to develop and support child care

£000 rounded to nearest £000

Local authority	1998–99
Aberdeen City	126
Aberdeen	145
Angus	82
Argyll and Bute	73
Clackmannanshire	58
Dumfries and Galloway	100
Dundee City	122
East Ayrshire	105
East Dunbartonshire	83
East Lothian	72
East Renfrewshire	75
Edinburgh, City of	240
Eilean Siar	43
Falkirk	104
Fife	218
Glasgow City	491
Highland	135
Inverclyde	87
Midlothian	69
Moray	72
North Ayrshire	114
North Lanarkshire	239
Orkney Islands	39
Perthshire and Kinross	91
Renfrewshire	135
Scottish Borders	77
Shetland Islands	41
South Ayrshire	87
South Lanarkshire	205
Stirling	70
West Dunbartonshire	93
West Lothian	112

Table 3: Additional money allocated for 1999–2000 to develop and support child care

£000

Local authority	Column 1 Child care strategy development	Column 2 Support for families with very young children	Column 3 Children's services development fund
Aberdeen City	198	315	301
Aberdeenshire	228	257	182
Angus	116	151	135
Argyll and Bute	95	117	106
Clackmannanshire	69	91	92
Dumfries and Galloway	146	207	190
Dundee City	157	341	391
East Ayrshire	134	229	241

Table 3: Additional money allocated for 1999–2000 to develop and support child care

£000

Local authority	Column 1 Child care strategy development	Column 2 Support for families with very young children	Column 3 Children's services development fund
East Dunbartonshire	113	123	95
East Lothian	100	130	116
East Renfrewshire	100	109	86
Edinburgh, City of	429	735	747
Eilean Siar	50	32	27
Falkirk	147	239	237
Fife	368	581	584
Glasgow City	926	1,699	2,039
Highland	213	309	285
Inverclyde	102	176	191
Midlothian	94	126	120
Moray	100	117	95
North Ayrshire	154	287	314
North Lanarkshire	368	637	667
Orkney Islands	45	22	16
Perthshire and Kinross	132	169	150
Renfrewshire	188	337	353
Scottish Borders	109	129	107
Shetland Islands	49	28	20
South Ayrshire	116	161	156
South Lanarkshire	325	518	515
Stirling	93	123	117
West Dunbartonshire	116	232	265
West Lothian	169	270	258

Excellence Fund

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will provide a breakdown by *(a)* local authority and *(b)* policy objective or project over £10,000 of the money made available through the Excellence Fund to support children's learning in financial year 1997–98; what moneys have been allocated by policy objective or project or by local authority under the Excellence Fund in financial years 1998–99 and 1999–2000; what are the proposed total amounts to be made available under this heading for each of the next three financial years; and what percentage of this will be under the control of the Scottish Parliament. [65929]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The Excellence Fund for Schools was announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland on 15 July 1998. The Fund will operate for the three years 1999–2000, 2000–01 and 2001–02 and comprises a Core Programme and a Special Programme. The £322 million of the Core Programme will be allocated by formulae to authorities in accordance with Scottish Office Education Circulars 4/98, 6/98 and 9/98 copies of which have been placed in the library.

£55 million will be made available under the Special Programme to support New Community Schools (£26 million), School Action Plans (£15 million) and Specialist Provision (£14 million). This money will be allocated to authorities on the basis of bids made against specific criteria. The Scottish Parliament will assume responsibility for expenditure from July.

Fishing Industry (Grants)

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will provide a breakdown detailing the value of grants of projects or groups receiving assistance by way of EU and Scottish Office grants to the fishing industry and the fish processing industry in the current financial year, individually and in total; what funds have already been earmarked *(a)* in total and *(b)* by project where already allocated for the next three financial years; and what percentage will be under the control of the Scottish Parliament. [65797]

Mr. Macdonald *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* Under the Financial Instrument for Fisheries Guidance (FIFG), EC and UK funding is being made available between 1994–1999 to the fishing industry and fish processing industry in Scotland for various purposes. These funds will have been allocated before the Scottish Parliament is established. Expenditure on grants under the current EU programme is as follows:

	£
Funds earmarked in this financial year	3,968,397
Funds already earmarked	24,996,818
Funds remaining to be awarded	3,760,358
Funds allocated to projects over the next three financial years	5,488,651

As the information required on individual projects relating to these figures is rather lengthy, I have arranged for copies to be placed in the Library.

The possibility of a successor scheme and its funding is being negotiated in the context of the Agenda 2000 proposals, but such aid will not be available before January 2000. The funding for any such scheme will come under the control of the Scottish Parliament.

Business Growth Fund

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will provide a breakdown of all allocations of money over £10,000 made under the Business Growth Fund in the financial year 1997–98; if he will give the allocations over £10,000 already made under this programme for financial years 1998–99 and 1999–2000; if he will give *(a)* the amount allocated to running costs and *(b)* the total funds available for each of the next three financial years; and what percentage of this will be under the control of the Scottish Parliament. [65809]

Mr. Dewar *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* I intend the new Business Growth Fund to become operational from April 1999. Planned provision is: £3 million in 1999–2000, £4 million in 2000–01, and £5 million in 2001–02.

Details of the scheme, including the amount to be allocated to running costs, are currently being finalised in discussion with Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise. I hope to be able to announce the final framework of the scheme shortly.

From July these resources will come under the control of the Scottish Parliament.

Consort Healthcare

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what NHS properties have been sold to Consort Healthcare and for what amounts; who carried out the

valuation of the properties and at what sums they were valued; what Government body or bodies were involved in the transactions; what assessment he made of the advantages of selling the properties on the open market and for what reasons he decided not to; if he will publish details of the transactions; and if he will make a statement. [65519]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* Throughout the PFI process our guiding principle has been to ensure the completion of proper economic appraisals and assure the delivery of value for money at all stages of this project. Furthermore through our openness policies we have ensured that as much information as is commercially possible has been put in the public domain.

The disposal of excess sites by the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh NHS Trust has been done in such a way as to ensure that the Trust has received the proper value for the sites based on independent valuation and has been safeguarded against development gains.

In accordance with our guidance, the Trust will in due course be publishing an Addendum to their Full Business Case setting out changes between FBC approval and financial close and summarising the commercial contract in plain English. That document will detail the land values and the contractual arrangements agreed to safeguard the Trust against overage.

The sites at the City Hospital, the Princess Margaret Rose Orthopaedic Hospital and the Dental Hospital were included as a prepayment in the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) deal with Consort Healthcare. Planning restrictions reduce significantly the area of developable land at the City and Princess Margaret Rose Hospitals. The values bid by Consort were as detailed in the following Table:

Site	*Value bid £ million*
City Hospital	6.640
Princess Margaret Rose Hospital	3.725
Dental Hospital	0.500

The values due to the Trust will be different since the values bid for the City and Princess Margaret Rose Hospitals will be subject to an inflation uplift from August 1996 until the date on which the sites are transferred to Consort Healthcare and potentially there may be reductions in the value of the Dental Hospital due to asbestos decontamination and Section 75 planning conditions.

The estimated total value of the City and Princess Margaret Rose Hospital sites after a 3 per cent. inflation uplift is almost £12 million.

Furthermore the Trust has entered into Overage Agreements whereby additional payments will be made to the Trust if, in the case of the City and Princess Margaret Rose Hospitals, the construction of houses is in excess of the anticipated number or the use of any part of the site is changed from residential to retail or business use; and, in the case of all three sites, if any undeveloped part of the site is sold for profit.

The values bid by Consort Healthcare were considered by the Trust to compare favourably to the values prepared by the District Valuer and the Trust's property adviser (Ryden International). The District Valuer and Ryden International's values are detailed in the table.

£ million

Site	*District valuer*	*Ryden International*
City Hospital	6.25–7.25	6.80
Princess Margaret Rose Hospital	3.25–3.70	3.70
Dental Hospital	0.50–0.55	0.35

The disposal of surplus sites within a PFI deal is the responsibility of the Trust. It is a generally accepted principle of PFI that such sites are included in the PFI deal. The average time taken to dispose of surplus NHS property is about 16 months. Where a site is not sold prior to becoming vacant the NHS has to bear the continuing costs of security and maintenance. I am content that when considered alongside the risks transferred to Consort Healthcare and the reduction in interest charges generated by the prepayment, the Trust has, as demonstrated in the Full Business Case approved by The Scottish Office and HM Treasury, achieved best value for money.

Research Grants

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will provide a breakdown detailing the value of grants made to higher education establishments for the purchase of new research equipment in the current financial year, individually and in total; what funds have already been earmarked *(a)* in total and *(b)* by project where already allocated for the next three financial years; and what percentage will be under the control of the Scottish Parliament. [65798]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) makes research grants to institutions to support a basic research capability in Scottish higher education institutions. These grants enable institutions to maintain and develop their research infrastructure. All SHEFC funding will come under the control of the Scottish Parliament.

The total value of SHEFC research grants in 1998–99 is £118.2 million. Most of this will be allocated to individual institutions selectively on the basis of the quality of research in institutions, as determined by the findings of the UK-wide Research Assessment Exercise. The allocation of this formula research grant (including an element for equipment) to each individual institution is set out in the table.

For 1998–99	*RAE-based*
University of Aberdeen	8,462,434
University of Abertay Dundee	306,746
University of Dundee	9,959,103
Edinburgh College of Art	500,649
University of Edinburgh	33,489,881
Glasgow Caledonian University	937,913
Glasgow School of Art	330,912
University of Glasgow	21,255,359
Heriot-Watt University	4,975,575
Moray House Institute of Education	516,478

For 1998–99	RAE-based
Napier University	808,208
Northern College of Education	0
University of Paisley	238,220
Queen Margaret College	439,136
Robert Gordon University	931,987
Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama	0
St. Andrew's College of Education	0
University of St. Andrews	7,175,199
Scottish College of Textiles	101,416
University of Stirling	4,453,386
University of Strathclyde	13,622,399
Total	108,505,001

Note:
This includes higher education institutions which have now merged

The SHEFC research allocations include a contribution to the UK-wide Joint Research Equipment Initiative, conducted jointly by the Higher Education Funding Councils and the Research Councils. The Council allocated £2.85 million to higher education institutions under this scheme in 1998–99 with joint funders providing a further £3.68 million. (Investments by the Research Councils and joint funders allocated a further £2 million to Scottish higher education institutions in 1998–99 under the JREI.) The Council allocations to higher education institutions are detailed in the table.

For 1998–99	JREI
University of Aberdeen	641,000
University of Abertay Dundee	36,000
University of Dundee	81,000
Edinburgh College of Art	0
University of Edinburgh	375,000
Glasgow Caledonian University	0
Glasgow School of Art	0
University of Glasgow	0
Heriot-Watt University	0
Moray House Institute of Education	0
Napier University	0
Northern College of Education	0
University of Paisley	155,000
Queen Margaret College	0
Robert Gordon University	0
Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama	0
St. Andrew's College of Education	0
University of St. Andrews	947,000
Scottish College of Textiles	0
University of Stirling	0
University of Strathclyde	615,000
Total	2,850,000

The total sums earmarked for SHEFC funding for the next three years are £588 million, £607 million and £640 million. The Council is currently working on final allocations for 1999–2000, including the split between teaching and research, and will publish details in March. However, included within that total is a new £23 million (£3/5/15 million) component which has been specifically earmarked to improve infrastructure in areas of research excellence aligned to the needs of the Scottish economy.

The only other major public investment in new research equipment is the Joint Infrastructure Fund, which will invest £600 million over the next two years. This collaborative UK-wide competition is being funded jointly by the UK Research Councils and the Wellcome Trust. The UK Research Councils are reserved under Schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1999.

School Refurbishments

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list in total and by project of over £50,000 the money made available to each local authority for school upgrade and refurbishment projects in real terms in financial years 1992–93 to 1997–98, indicating the allocations already made in the current financial year, and those earmarked for 1999–2000, in total and by project of over £50,000 for school upgrades and refurbishments; what is the total budget available for school upgrades and refurbishments in the next three financial years; and what percentage of this will be under the control of the Scottish Parliament. [65938]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* Such work is funded by the local authorities from the general resources available to them for capital expenditure across a range of services, including educational building. Capital allocations to the authorities, which are, in effect, general borrowing consents, are neither project nor programme specific. However, provision under the Comprehensive Spending Review allows for an increase of £185 million in local authority capital expenditure on school buildings over the three years from April 1999.

As part of the New Deal for Schools announced in the July 1997 Budget, £115.7 million is being made available to authorities over five years, in addition to the general resources available under the normal capital allocation arrangements, to tackle the backlog of repairs to school buildings and to improve facilities for ICT. These resources are being distributed to authorities on a formula basis through capital grant. The amounts payable to authorities in the 1997–98 and 1998–99 financial years are listed in the table. Project information is not available centrally in the form requested. Authorities have been advised that the distribution under this grant arrangement in 1999–2000 is expected to be broadly the same as in the current year.

An announcement about the distribution of the general resources available to local authorities for capital expenditure in future years is expected late next month. Capital allocations to local authorities will come under the control of the Scottish Parliament.

Budget 1997—New Deal for Schools capital distribution

£000

	1997–98 Capital	1998–99 Capital
Total for distribution	8,900,000	26,700,000
Aberdeen City	282	847
Aberdeenshire	385	1,155
Angus	196	587
Argyll & Bute	202	607
Borders	188	563
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar	91	273
City of Edinburgh	556	1,667
City of Glasgow	1,003	3,008
Clackmannanshire	80	240
Dunfries & Galloway	253	759
Dundee City	244	732
East Ayrshire	216	649
East Dunbartonshire	222	667

Budget 1997—New Deal for Schools capital distribution

£000

	1997–98 Capital	1998–99 Capital
East Lothian	137	412
East Renfrewshire	169	506
Falkirk	226	679
Fife	593	1,778
Highland	447	1,341
Inverclyde	179	537
Midlothian	150	450
Moray	165	495
North Ayrshire	263	788
North Lanarkshire	640	1,919
Perth & Kinross	207	621
Renfrewshire	310	931
South Ayrshire	200	601
South Lanarkshire	553	1,658
Stirling	156	467
West Dunbartonshire	186	557
West Lothian	273	820
Shetland	71	213
Orkney Islands	57	172
Total	8,900	26,700

Education Research Programmes

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list for each project of over £10,000 the education research programmes commissioned by his Department in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000; what is the total proposed budget for education research projects for each of the next three financial years; and what percentage of this will be under the control of the Scottish Parliament. [65931]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* A list of the education research projects commissioned over £10,000 in *(a)* 1997–98, and *(b)* 1998–99 is set out. No projects have yet been commissioned for 1999–2000:

Projects Commissioned over £10,000: 1997–98

- School Improvement in Deprived Areas
- Cost of Pre-school Education Provision
- Apple Classroom of Tomorrow (ACOT) (2nd Stage)
- The Effectiveness of Careers Services
- Teachers Knowledge Needs of Information and Communications Technology
- Commitment and Barriers to Learning
- Quality in Pre-school Education Provision: The Role of Parents
- Quality in Pre-school Education Provision: Staffing and Staff Development
- Research Studentship—Improving School Effectiveness
- Pre-school Education: Supply and Demand
- Assessment Practice for Special Training Needs
- Scottish School Leavers Survey—Special Studies
- Survey of Career Destinations of Contract Researchers
- Evaluation of the Early Intervention Programme
- Institutional Support for Overseas Students (SETEG)

Projects Commissioned over £10,000: 1998–99

- Impact of Higher Still on Attainment in Core Skills
- Teachers' Continuing Professional Development (CPD)
- Literature Review for the Beattie Committee
- Costs of FE Provision in Rural, Remote and Island Areas in Scotland
- Costs of Partnerships in Initial Teacher Training
- Factors influencing Changes to School Effectiveness
- Higher Still Evaluation—Survey of HE Staff, Careers Officers, Trainers and Employers
- Pre-school Provision in Rural Areas
- New Entrants to FE
- Distribution of FE Provision
- Impact of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Initiatives
- OECD Survey of Student Achievement in Reading, Maths and Science at Age 15
- Higher Still Evaluation—Survey of School and FE Staff
- Higher Still Evaluation—Cohort Study
- Developments in Pre-school Education
- Review of Partnership in Pre-school Education
- Scottish School Leavers Survey of 22/23 Year Olds in 1999
- Baseline Survey of Parents Demand for Childcare.

The total proposed budget for education research projects over each of the next three financial years is £947k per annum. This budget will come under the control of the Scottish Parliament.

Knee and Hip Joint Replacements

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what were the average waiting times for each health board for *(a)* knee and *(b)* hip joint replacement operations for September (i) 1997 and (ii) 1998. [66887]

Mr. Galbraith: The mean waiting time for knee and hip joint replacement operations for the years ending 30 September 1997 and 30 September 1998 for each Health Board in Scotland is provided in the table.

From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Knee and hip joint replacement operations carried out by the NHS in Scotland—mean waiting times by area of residence

Health Board	Knee joint replacement Year ending 30 September 1997	Knee joint replacement Year ending 30 September [1]1998	Hip joint replacement Year ending 30 September 1997	Hip joint replacement Year ending 30 September [1]1998
Argyll and Clyde	177	181	159	141
Ayrshire and Arran	104	117	100	119
Borders	88	109	82	113
Dumfries and Galloway	206	165	158	134
Fife	105	143	104	130
Forth Valley	243	223	155	192
Grampian	95	95	86	63
Greater Glasgow	200	222	173	205
Highland	198	211	193	178
Lanarkshire	135	126	118	108
Lothian	151	161	136	141
Orkney	57	77	51	60
Shetland	105	109	102	115
Tayside	140	159	125	123
Western Isles	66	67	77	110

[1] Provisional

Source:

ISD Scotland

Class Sizes

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what *(a)* number and *(b)* percentage of children in primary (i) one, (ii) two and (iii) three were in classes of 31 or more in September 1998 (1) in total and (2) by local authority. [66889]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested will not be available until mid February. I will write to the hon. Member at that time and arrange to have a copy of my letter placed in the Library. From 1 July this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Police Officers

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many police officers there were in each force in Scotland in *(a)* March 1997, *(b)* September 1997, *(c)* March 1998 and *(d)* September 1998. [66888]

Mr. McLeish: The information is shown in the table.

	March 1997	*September 1997*	*March 1998*	*September 1998*
Central	686	683	703	710
Dumfries and Galloway	412	424	439	445
Fife	831	845	855	850
Grampian	1,173	1,189	1,193	1,214
Lothian and Borders	2,691	2,689	2,691	2,641
Northern	649	651	657	659
Strathclyde	7,231	7,326	7,299	7,233
Tayside	1,116	1,126	1,143	1,154
Total	14,789	14,933	14,980	14,906

Housing Budget

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what will be the estimated Scottish Office housing budget in cash terms and at 1998–99 prices for the years *(a)* 1999–2000, *(b)* 2000–01 and *(c)* 2001–02. [66890]

Mr. Macdonald: Planned expenditure, from the Scottish Office budget, on housing over the next three years is shown in the table. From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

£ million

	Cash terms	*1998–99 prices*
1999–2000	512	500
2000–01	622	592
2001–02	640	594

Waiting Lists

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many NHS patients have been waiting over 12 months for their NHS operation *(a)* by health board and *(b)* by quarter from March 1997. [67364]

Mr. Galbraith: The number of patients with a Patient's Charter guarantee who waited over 12 months for inpatient and day case treatment, by Health Board area, on the dates requested, is provided in the following table.

From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

NHS in Scotland: Number of patients with a Patient's Charter Guarantee who waited more than 12 months for inpatient and day case treatment

Health board of residence	*31 March 1997*	*30 June 1977*	*30 September 1997*	*31 December 1997*	*31 March 1998*	*30 June 1998*	*30 September 1998*
Argyll and Clyde	2	26	21	5	—	—	—
Ayrshire and Arran	15	2	3	1	—	—	—
Borders	—	—	1	1	—	—	—
Dumfries and Galloway	—	—	1	2	—	—	—
Fife	1	7	1	2	—	—	—
Forth Valley	1	1	1	1	—	—	—
Grampian	—	—	—	2	—	—	—
Greater Glasgow	1	98	191	345	—	—	—
Highland	—	3	—	2	—	—	—
Lanarkshire	—	2	1	—	—	—	—
Lothian	1	3	15	33	—	—	—
Orkney	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Shetland	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Tayside	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Western Isles	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Other/Unknown	1	—	—	—	—	—	—
Scotland	22	142	235	394	—	—	—

Source:

ISD Scotland

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many NHS patients were waiting to be *(a)* seen following GP written referral and *(b)* following referral to consultation, for each quarter since 30 March 1997. [67362]

Mr. Galbraith: Information on waiting lists is collected centrally only for hospital inpatients and day cases. Data are available on first outpatient referrals and the length of time that patients waited for their first outpatient appointment. The percentage of patients who received a first outpatient appointment within nine weeks and 18 weeks following a General Medical Practitioner/ General Dental Practitioner referral for each quarter since March 1997, is provided in the table.

From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

NHS in Scotland: Percentage of patients waiting within 9 weeks and 18 weeks for a first outpatient appointment

Date	*Percentage waiting within 9 weeks*	*Percentage waiting within 18 weeks*
31 March 1997	70.7	91.2
30 June 1997	72.3	93.2
30 September 1997	66.5	91.7
31 December 1997	67.1	89.7
31 March 1998	68.3	90.2
30 June 1998	68.9	91.5
30 September 1998[1]	64.6	89.8

[1] Provisional

Source:
Form SMR0/SMR01, ISD Scotland

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Yemen

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the British Consul General in Aden first learnt of the detention of the five British citizens being detained in Aden. [66685]

Mr. Fatchett: Yemeni officials first mentioned on 29 December that they had arrested some, unnamed, British nationals. The Yemeni authorities confirmed the names and details of the five British nationals on 7 January.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what estimate he has made of the number of British visitors to Yemen in each of the last three years. [66945]

Mr. Fatchett: There are no reliable estimates available for the number of British visitors to Yemen.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to increase the number of diplomatic personnel at the British mission in Yemen. [66942]

Mr. Fatchett: None at present.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when his Department first learnt that the five detainees in Yemen had been charged. [66940]

Mr. Fatchett: In the afternoon of 15 January the British Consul General in Aden reported that four of the men had been charged and the fifth was due to be charged later that night. Our Consul General confirmed on 16 January that the fifth man had been charged late on 15 January.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the British Consul General in Aden met each of the five detainees in Yemen. [66939]

Mr. Fatchett: The British Consul General in Aden visited Shahid Butt, Ghulam Hussein and Sarmad Ahmed on 8 January and Mohssen Ghailan on 9 January. He visited Malik Nasser Harhara, who is a British/Yemeni dual national on 14 January. He is pressing for recurring consular access.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many British nationals he estimates live in Yemen. [66944]

Mr. Fatchett: According to our latest Annual Consular Return dated 1997, there were approximately 350 British Nationals resident in Yemen. The current figure is believed to be in the region of 400.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he has taken to gain access to a doctor for the five detainees in Aden. [66941]

Mr. Fatchett: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary telephoned Prime Minister Iriyani on 14 January to register our concern about complaints of ill-treatment and torture, and asked for access to the detainees by an independent doctor. Mr. Iriyani undertook to work for a positive response. My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State asked for access when she met the Yemeni Ambassador on 13 January. Our Embassy continues to raise the matter daily with the Yemeni authorities.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when and how he first learnt of the kidnap of two Britons in Yemen on 17 January. [66938]

Mr. Fatchett: The Netherlands Embassy in Sana'a notified our Embassy at 1500 hours local time on 17 January that a Dutch family and Mr. and Mrs. Rosser had not returned to Sana'a as expected. A few hours later their vehicles were found abandoned 180 kms north of Sana'a. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office was immediately informed.

Brian Peters and Malcolm Rennie

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what communication the Government have had with the Australian Government since 1975 concerning investigations into the deaths of Brian Peters and Malcolm Rennie; and if he will make a statement. [66850]

Mr. Fatchett: The Australian government have taken the lead on this issue as the two British journalists, one New Zealander and two Australians killed at Balibo, East Timor, in 1975 were based in Australia and worked for Australian television companies. We keep in regular contact with the Australian government and welcome their

decision to refer recent new material on the killings, to Mr. Tom Sherman, who conducted the comprehensive 1996 report on Balibo, for his consideration.

During my meeting in Jakarta in October 1998, I raised the Balibo incident with President Habibi, who promised to look into the matter further.

UN Security Council

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what policies the British Government intend to pursue with a view to ensuring that future decisions of the United Nations Security Council are upheld. [66739]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The United Kingdom is committed to ensuring that the authority and decisions of the Security Council are upheld. The policies to be pursued will depend on the UN decisions concerned.

Honorary Consuls

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the conditions of service and method of appointment of honorary consuls. [66869]

Mr. Fatchett: Prospective Honorary Consuls are nominated by Heads of Mission and their appointment is approved by the Head of Consular Division in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The candidates are usually individuals of some standing in the local community. They may be foreign nationals.

Honorary Consuls are not salaried employees. They give their time free of charge and receive a honorarium; the maximum currently is £1,835. They may claim certain admissible expenses e.g. official postage. Their consular functions are carried out from their private or business address. Generally no payment is made from official funds towards rent.

Honorary Consuls perform statutory and non-statutory functions. Statutory functions include duties under the Merchant Shipping Acts, notarial acts, and levying of Consular Fees. Non-Statutory duties include protecting the interests of British nationals, particularly those in distress; and promoting British commercial interests. They do not register births and deaths or issue standard passports. They are not expected to undertake political reporting or information work.

Honorary Consul appointments are for a period of five years and may be terminated by either side giving not less than one months's notice. At the end of the initial term and subsequent five year terms, the appointment may be renewed subject to the exigencies of the public service and provided the Head of Mission is satisfied with the incumbent's performance. The retirement age is 65.

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many honorary consuls are in post. [66868]

Mr. Fatchett: There are 242 Honorary Consults in 90 countries.

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many honorary consuls are currently employed by the UK owned *(a)* tobacco, *(b)* armaments and *(c)* other industries with commercial interests in the host country. [66870]

Mr. Fatchett: Most Honorary Consuls are business people. A breakdown of their activity or type of employment is not readily available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Kosovo

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Yugoslav authorities in respect of the massacre at Racak. [66947]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Acting on the instructions of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, the UK Chargé in Belgrade took action on 17 January on behalf of the EU members of the Contact Group to express condemnation of the Racak killings to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Belgrade, and to call for the withdrawal of the forces then in Racak, full compliance with the relevant Security Council resolutions and the agreements entered into by President Milosevic last October, access to Kosovo for the Chief Prosecutor of the International Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, and the suspension of police and army officers in the Racak area on 15 January. The UK Chargé also joined in an EU demarche to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 18 January which made similar points. That same day a senior official of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office saw the Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and made clear to him that we condemn the killings at Racak and stressed the need for the authorities in Belgrade to comply with the demands of the international community, also handing him a copy of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary's Statement to the House that afternoon, 18 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns 565–67.

The UK has also played an active role in deliberations of the UN Security Council, the OSCE, NATO and the EU leading to the clear statements issued by those bodies in reaction to the Racak killings. The authorities in Belgrade can be in no doubt of our condemnation of what happened, and our view of the action which now needs to be taken.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the Yugoslavian Ambassador in respect of the massacre at Racak. [66948]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: A senior official of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office saw the Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia on 18 January, and made clear to him that we condemn the killings at Racak and stressed the need for the authorities in Belgrade to comply with the demands of the international community, also handing him a copy of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary's Statement to the House that afternoon, 18 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns 565–67. Together with EU colleagues, the UK Chargé in Belgrade has taken similar action.

BBC World Service

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what stage discussions with the BBC World Service have reached in relation to their three year plan; and if he will make a statement. [67106]

Mr. Fatchett: The BBC World Service is drawing up its strategic plan for the next three years. The BBC are considering their priorities in the light of political, technological and commercial developments, given the increase in World Service funding of on average 3.8 per cent. in each year over the 1998–99 level. We expect detailed proposals to be submitted to my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary soon.

Kashmir

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will publish six-monthly reports on progress towards a resolution of the conflict in Kashmir. [67039]

Mr. Fatchett: Our view is that it is primarily for India and Pakistan to reach a solution over Kashmir although we have regularly repeated our willingness to assist if that is what the parties wish. We do not believe that publication of progress reports will help towards a settlement.

Swathi Pankhania

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on what basis the entry clearance officer in Bombay is calling for additional evidence in the case of Swathi Pankhania, HO Ref. S787788. [67235]

Mr. Fatchett: The Migration and Visa Correspondence Unit will be writing shortly to my hon. Friend to inform him of the outcome of this case.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he has taken to ensure that the entry clearance officer in Bombay is informed of his letters to the hon. Member for Leicester, East in respect of the case of Swathi Pankhania, Ref S787788. [67233]

Mr. Fatchett: We have no record of having sent any letter to my hon. Friend about the case of Swathi Pankhania. However, we have seen reference to a letter from the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), to my hon. Friend, dated 11 August 1998.

Iraq

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if a mechanism has existed for British members of the UN Weapons Inspection Team in Iraq to provide intelligence information to Her Majesty's Government and its agencies. [67051]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The Government have made clear that all information exchanges between the UK and UNSCOM have been strictly in pursuit of UNSCOM's mandate to dismantle Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction capability.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs under what circumstances British members of the UN Weapons Inspection Team in Iraq carried out tasks in that country beyond those required by the UN. [67020]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: None. All activities carried out by UK nationals serving as UNSCOM inspectors have been strictly in pursuit of UNSCOM's mandate to dismantle Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction capability.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the talks by his Department's Director for the Middle East and North Africa with the Government of Iran about the Iraq situation. [67354]

Mr. Fatchett: The FCO Director for the Middle East and North Africa visited Iran on 13–14 January for talks with Deputy Foreign Minister Sarmadi, Deputy Foreign Minister Zarif and the Director General for Western Europe, Mr. Qasemi. The Director briefed the Iranians on our thinking on the way forward on Iraq, focusing on activity in the Security Council, particularly on weapons of mass destruction issues, and the need to respond to the humanitarian situation.

Mr. Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what are the objectives of Her Majesty's Government policy on Iraq. [67275]

Mr. Fatchett: As a permanent member of the Security Council, our main objective is to ensure that Iraq complies with its obligations under UN resolutions. This is in line with the parallel aim of protecting the UK's interests both in the region and more widely. In pursuit of those objectives we are discussing with other Security Council members how to move forward, both on the key outstanding disarmament questions and on the humanitarian issues.

Al Shifa Factory, Khartoum

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he received from the Ambassador to the Sudan following his visit to the Al Shifa factory prior to the US air strike. [67643]

Mr. Fatchett: The British Ambassador has visited the Al Shifa factory only once, for the official opening in July 1997. There was no reporting following this ceremonial occasion.

Senator Pinochet

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the basis for his oral statement of 19 January 1999, *Official Report*, column 705, that Senator Pinochet could not be permitted to return to Chile without the Government defying the courts and ending due legal process. [67311]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) asked whether it would not have been better to send Senator Pinochet to face due process in Chile. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary's reply was on the basis that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary issued an Authority to Proceed in respect of the Spanish request and that this has been passed to Bow Street Magistrates court to consider

committal. Issues relating to state immunity are currently being heard by the House of Lords. Due legal process is being followed.

Mr. Trend: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his oral answer of 19 January 1999, *Official Report*, column 701, if he will indicate the location in the *Official Report* of the answer to which he referred. [67633]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I am pleased to have this opportunity to set the record straight. I was incorrect in my belief that the answer was in the *Official Report*. I have written to the hon. Member to apologise for this inadvertent mistake.

Mr. Trend: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when his Department was first contacted by Scotland Yard concerning the question of the diplomatic immunity status of Senator Pinochet. [67625]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The Metropolitan Police contacted the FCO about Senator Pinochet's diplomatic immunity on 16 October.

Mr. Trend: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if his Department was asked for help by the Chilean Embassy in London in arranging a flight to Santiago for Senator Pinochet in the week beginning 12 October 1998. [67634]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The Chilean Ambassador telephoned the FCO on 15 October to discuss Senator Pinochet's travel arrangements. FCO officials referred the Ambassador to British Airways. On 16 October, the Ambassador informed the FCO that he had secured a seat for Senator Pinochet on the British Airways flight leaving for Santiago on 20 October.

Mr. Trend: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations his Department received from the Chilean Embassy on 16 October 1998. [67631]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The Chilean Ambassador telephoned the FCO on 16 October to follow up a conversation the previous day about Senator Pinochet's travel arrangements. The Ambassador informed officials that he had secured a seat for Senator Pinochet on a British Airways flight leaving for Santiago on 20 October.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 20 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *508*, for what reasons Mr. Penfold did not use the communication facilities at the German Embassy to communicate with London. [67626]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Whilst Mr. Penfold was in Conakry he received a number of classified telegrams via the German Embassy. He did not use these facilities for sending reports to London. He has said it was not necessary. A commercial fax facility was available at his hotel and allowed him to communicate with London directly.

St. Helena

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 18 January, *Official Report*, column *347*, on St. Helena, if he will state the reason for Mr. Timmreck being the subject of an exclusion order by the Governor of St. Helena; and what right of appeal is available to him. [67353]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The then Chief Secretary of the Government of St. Helena gave full reasons for the exclusion order to Mr. Timmreck in a letter dated 4 March 1994. If Mr. Timmreck's permission were obtained by the hon. Member for Wrexham, I would arrange for him to receive a copy of the letter.

I understand that Mr. Timmreck has applied to the Governor for the exclusion order to be revoked. This was considered. Mr. Timmreck was asked for more information which he has not yet furnished.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to provide St. Helena with landing facilities for aircraft. [67118]

Clare Short: I have been asked to reply.

In 1998 we agreed to fund a preliminary desk study into the technical feasibility of an airlink to St. Helena. The final report is due by Easter. If this is positive, we will fund a broader feasibility study of the engineering, economic financial and social considerations.

Iran

Mr. Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on relations with Iran. [67276]

Mr. Fatchett: The New York agreement of September 1998 has allowed a welcome improvement in relations between the United Kingdom and Iran. We will continue to look for ways of strengthening relations further in areas of mutual interest while also pressing, with our EU partners, for improvements in Iranian policies which give us particular concern.

Dependent Territories

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he is taking to ensure that the laws on homosexuals in dependent territories will be changed. [67569]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Homosexual acts remain an offence in the five Caribbean Overseas Territories. We have pointed out to the Governments of these Territories that their legislation must comply with the international obligations which Britain has extended to them, and that, in the absence of local reforms in this area, we may have to impose appropriate legislation by Order in Council.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many UK overseas territories have brought their law on human rights in line with that of the UK since May 1997. [67566]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: There are three human rights issues on which the laws of some of the UK's Overseas Territories differ substantively from those of the UK; capital punishment for murder (though only in Bermuda), judicial corporal punishment, and the law relating to homosexual acts. Since May 1997 three Overseas

Territories have abolished judicial corporal punishment. No other human rights legislation has been enacted in the Overseas Territories since May 1997.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he expects to publish the White Paper on Dependent Territories. [67565]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We expect that the White Paper will be published shortly. Preparation for the Paper has involved wide ranging consultation on a broad range of subjects. It has been a complex process now drawing to a close.

Tobacco Advertising

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what instructions he has given to UK diplomatic posts abroad regarding the promotion of tobacco products. [67568]

Mr. Fatchett: Following last month's White Paper, this Department is preparing guidelines for posts.

EU Meetings

Mr. Trend: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the forthcoming business in the Council of the EU for the period until 31 March and the major EU meetings for the period until the end of the German presidency. [67620]

Ms Quin: I refer the hon. Member to the European Calendar: January-June 1999, which was deposited in the Libraries of the House on 14 January 1999.

Referendums (EU Funds)

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what conclusions he has reached from his consideration of the Neill Committee's recommendations on the conduct of referendums, with particular reference to the distribution of European Community funds. [66144]

Mr. George Howarth: I have been asked to reply.

The Government will announce their conclusions on these issues when they publish a draft Bill, to implement the main findings of the Neill report, before the summer recess.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 26 January 1999

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

National Air Traffic Services

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the changes to the operational autonomy of National Air Traffic Services which will follow its reorganisation. [66859]

Dr. Reid: Detailed decisions on the public private partnership proposals for National Air Traffic Services will not be taken until after the consultation period closes on 31 January 1999. However, our preferred option, as set out in the consultation paper, would give NATS autonomy within a new framework, policed by an independent regulator.

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what factors underlay his decision not to *(a)* retain National Air Traffic Services in public ownership and *(b)* privatise it completely. [66860]

Dr. Reid: The Government's reasons for proposing a public/private partnership for NATS, in preference to any other option, are set out in paragraphs 2–6 of the document "A public/private partnership for NATS: a consultation paper by the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions", copies of which were placed in the Library of the House on 20 October 1998. In essence, we believe that a public/private partnership would provide an innovative solution to growing air traffic demands in the next century, while maintaining high standards of safety and performance through strong, independent, safety and economic regulation. A partnership would also:

free NATS' investment and management decisions from Government financing constraints and enable private capital to be used in ways more appropriate to the business;

provide the right structure of incentives and disciplines to maximise efficiency;

provide NATS with the opportunity to develop its business, for example by expanding overseas, and manage itself in accordance with best private sector practice;

clearly separate regulation from service provision so as to deliver greater accountability and transparency in NATS' operations;

maintain sufficient rights and safeguards for Government to address public sector interests such as national security and the UK's international relationships;

allow the taxpayer to share in the success of the company; and

allow other transport schemes to benefit from the proceeds of the share sale.

The consultation period ends on 31 January 1999.

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the ability of the reorganised National Air Traffic Services to guarantee necessary levels of investment. [66861]

Dr. Reid: The Government issued a consultation paper setting out our broad proposals for a public/private partnership (PPP) for National Air Traffic Services (NATS) on 20 October 1998. Decisions on the detail of the proposals will not be taken until after the consultation period closes on 31 January 1999. However, one of the main objectives of the PPP is to free NATS from public sector borrowing restrictions so that it can more easily invest for the future.

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the Civil Aviation Pension Scheme will continue to be open to *(a)* existing and *(b)* future members of staff of National Air Traffic Services after the proposed reorganisation of the service. [66862]

Dr. Reid: The Government are currently consulting on the details of future pension arrangements for staff of National Air Traffic Services (NATS), as part of the consultation exercise on the proposed public/private partnership for NATS. The Secretary of State hopes to make a statement in due course, after responses to the consultation have been considered.

Pensioners' Travel Passes

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will preserve the rights of those low-income pensioners who are currently entitled to tokens redeemable against community bus and taxi fares when he implements his proposals for half-price travel passes. [66821]

Ms Glenda Jackson: There are no statutory rights, as such, to a particular kind of arrangement for concessionary travel. It is for each local authority to decide what concessions to arrange for its residents. Consultation on the introduction of the standard minimum scheme will consider the future arrangements for token schemes.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to compensate local authorities in whose area there is a disproportionate number of pensioners when he implements his proposal for half-price bus travel permits. [66820]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Local authority expenditure receives support from the Government by means of Revenue Support Grant. All aspects of our proposal for a national minimum standard for concessionary travel, including finance and the formula for the distribution of RSG, will be subject of consultation with local government and other relevant organisations.

Eurotunnel

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if it is Government policy that no vehicle powered by liquid

petroleum gas and no dual-powered vehicle may be transported on the Eurotunnel shuttle; and if he will make a statement. [67343]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Eurotunnel will need to obtain safety approval from the bi-national Intergovernmental Commission (acting on the advice of the Channel Tunnel Safety Authority) before they can convey LPG- and dual-powered vehicles. Subject to this safety approval, the Government would welcome the opening of Shuttle services to these vehicles.

Defence Estate

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research he has commissioned on the redevelopment of the Defence estate; and when it was published. [67128]

Mr. Raynsford: Fuller Peiser Property Consultants were commissioned in 1997 to review the existing policy context of Ministry of Defence disposals in England, and to advise Government on how they should seek to obtain value for money whilst having regard to the wider interest of Government. The Consultants' Report: "Development of the Redundant Defence Estate" has been received, and we are considering it. I expect to publish it shortly.

Publicly Owned Sites

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had, and with whom, concerning the definition of public interest in the sale of publicly owned sites. [67129]

Mr. Raynsford: My officials will be discussing the definition of public interest as part of the remit of a working group of interested Departments. The group will be considering recommendations in the Fuller Peiser Property Consultants Report: "Development of the Redundant Defence Estate".

Pesticides (Research)

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the research work which he has commissioned in connection with his pesticide minimisation policy; what are the terms of reference of that research; and if he will publish the results of the research. [67103]

Mr. Meale: My Department has commissioned several research projects in connection with the pesticide minimisation policy including: a study into the private costs and benefits of pesticide minimisation, carried out by RPA and Entec; an assessment of a range of economic instruments for pesticide minimisation, carried out by ECOTEC Research and Consulting; and research into the design of a tax/charge scheme for pesticides, also carried out by ECOTEC Research and Consulting. This last research considers the detailed design and potential impact of a charge or tax intended primarily to secure reductions in pesticide use, better targeting and substitution by less harmful pesticides or alternative techniques. A decision concerning publishing the results of this report will be made in due course.

Waste Incineration

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the proposed EU directive on the incineration of waste; and if he will make a statement. [67038]

Mr. Meale: An Explanatory Memorandum (EM12791/98) on the proposal for a Council Directive on the incineration of waste was submitted to Parliament on 30 November 1998. Expert consultants are currently finalising a report on the proposal, on the basis of which a Regulatory and Environmental Impact Assessment will shortly be submitted to Parliament under a Supplementary Explanatory Memorandum.

Highmoor Quarry, Oldham

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he has taken to ensure the compliance with the landfill site licence in respect of noxious smells at the Highmoor Quarry site in Oldham. [67225]

Mr. Meale: The Environment Agency is responsible for the supervision and enforcement of waste management licences and has provided the following information about odours at Highmoor Quarry.

The licence for this site requires that

"There shall be no offensive smells or other strong odours detectable outside the boundary of the site. All malodours detected shall be investigated and immediate steps taken to ameliorate the problem."

The steps taken to ensure compliance with this licence condition include the Environment Agency's requiring the site operator to take measures to prevent the emission of odour. This resulted in the capping and covering of the leachate and monitoring wells and the engagement of "Entec" as consultants to carry out further investigation of odour emissions at the site. The consultants' report is due in the week beginning 25 January 1999.

The Environment Agency is also carrying out its own investigations. It has established a "footprint" of odour sources at the site and submitted air samples for analysis of the odour constituents. This will enable the Agency to monitor for identified determinants at sensitive locations. As a part of its consideration of compliance with the licence, the Agency is registering all complaints about odours from the site and plotting their locations, with the intention of linking them to meteorological conditions.

Parliamentary Travel Arrangements

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy to recommend that hon. Members returning on parliamentary business to Heathrow and Gatwick airports are encouraged to return to Westminster by public transport. [67570]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* A key aim of our New Deal for Transport is to encourage individuals to switch modes, to drive less and to walk, cycle and use public transport more. The White Paper attaches particular importance to improving public transport links to airports for passengers and employees alike. Heathrow and Gatwick both already have excellent

public transport connections to Westminster, and major investments are now underway and planned to improve services further still.

British Standard (Lead Replacement Petrol)

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to establish a British standard for lead replacement petrol in time for the withdrawal of leaded petrol for sale by 1 January 2000. [67360]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I am pleased to report that the British Standards Institution is well advanced with the preparation of a standard for lead replacement petrol. It is expected to be published during the summer months in good time for January 2000.

Quality Partnerships (Freight)

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to paragraph 1.43 of the White Paper, "A New Deal for Transport", what measures he proposes to facilitate quality partnerships for freight between local authorities and lorry operators. [67614]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* The draft guidance on Local Transport Plans, issued on 12 November 1998, explained that, as well as passenger transport, issues connected with freight distribution would need to be addressed within the plan. As stated in our Transport White Paper, our intention is that these be addressed through quality partnerships for freight.

The draft guidance pointed to the practical guidance in "A Manual of Guidance for Local Authorities and Others: Lorries and Traffic Management" which was distributed to all local authorities in 1990, providing 256 pages of practical, low cost advice designed to promote efficient distribution of goods and minimise their environmental and social impacts. This manual is complemented by a booklet "Lorries in the Community" which provides the strategic context; explaining the potential impact of lorries in terms of congestion, pollution, noise, vibration and damage to the road infrastructure and the conflict that can arise between the need for access to town centres with the desire to improve safety for pedestrians and other road users. It explains the value of voluntary agreements and the value of the practical measures described in the manual in meeting the Government's goals for distribution.

The Freight Transport Association has been promoting a best practice initiative "Delivering the Goods" which has helped put the ideas into practice.

Over the coming months the Department will develop further guidance by drawing together best practice and experience on how to go about establishing quality partnerships. Through sharing this experience with as wide an audience as possible, we will provide further, practical advice to local authorities.

By bringing environmental, social, planning and business objectives together, partnerships can play a key part in promoting a more sustainable system for goods distribution. We intend to develop this theme further in a follow up to the White Paper on sustainable distribution.

Bridges

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the changes in mileage undertaken by *(a)* heavy vehicles and *(b)* freight trains as a consequence of the implementation of the bridge strengthening requirements of EU Directive 85/3/EEC. [67591]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My Department has no information on the extent to which heavy goods vehicle mileage or freight train mileage may have been influenced by any weight limits placed on bridges as a result of the higher lorry weights allowed since 1 January this year under EU Directive 85/3/EEC.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what *(a)* amounts expressed at 1999 prices and *(b)* percentages of moneys were allocated to highway authorities under TPPs related to bridge strengthening works, for each year since 1987. [67592]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Separate figures cannot be given for bridge strengthening only. The following table shows annual allocations to English local highway authorities for bridge maintenance, assessment and strengthening, both in 1999 prices and as a proportion of the total allocations as part of the Transport Policies and Programme (TPP) system. Prior to 1991–92, these resources were allocated as part of the Revenue Support Grant settlement and could not be separately identified.

Year	*Bridge maintenance assessment and strengthening allocations at 1999 prices (£ million)*	*Percentage of total TPP allocations*
1991–92	111	12
1992–93	132	13
1993–94	159	13
1994–95	156	15
1995–96	136	13
1996–97	109	12
1997–98	92	12
1998–99	84	13
1999–2000	128	20

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the first bridge strengthening project began in implementation of EU Directive 85/3/EEC; what percentage by mile of work required has been completed to date; and when he expects work required under the Directive to be completed. [67594]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The first strengthening of a Highways Agency bridge under the current assessment and strengthening programme was carried out in 1989. Of the Highways Agency's bridges which require strengthening, some two thirds have been permanently strengthened to date and the remainder have been safeguarded pending permanent strengthening. The permanent strengthening work is expected to be completed in 2001. There is no estimate by mile of the work required to implement EU Directive 85/3/EEC but the whole motorway and trunk road network is operational for HGVs. This network carries 57 per cent. of goods vehicle traffic.

About 85 per cent. of the assessments of structures on local roads in England are complete and of these some 95 per cent. now meet the new load-bearing standard.

As assessments are not yet complete, it is not possible to determine when local road bridge strengthening work will be completed. Not all of this work, however, is a requirement of Directive 85/3/EEC. Authorities' programmes include strengthenings which meet the needs of their local communities as well as those on routes of greatest strategic importance for HGVs.

Railways (Rolling Stock)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals the Rail Franchising Director has received from the rolling stock companies to enable the replacement of Mark 1 rolling stock during the life of the existing franchises of Connex South Central and South West Trains. [67774]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Franchising Director has not received any such proposals from the rolling stock companies. As I said in the answer to the hon. Member on 12 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns *102–04*, it is the responsibility of the train operators to make such arrangements with rolling stock companies as may be necessary to meet either their commitments to the Franchising Director or any requirements of the Health and Safety Executive. The Government are considering recommendations from the Health and Safety Executive that all Mark 1 rolling stock on the network should be modified or rebodied by 2003 and any modified stock replaced by 2007.

Car Parks

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he gives to *(a)* train operating companies and *(b)* bus operators in respect of car parking charges at their stations. [67588]

Ms Glenda Jackson: None. It is entirely a matter for the train operating companies and the bus operators concerned to determine car parking charges at their stations.

Business Rates

Mr. Collins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has for the future of the transitional relief system affecting business rates beyond 2000; and if he will make a statement. [67647]

Mr. Raynsford: No decision has yet been taken on whether to have a transitional rate relief scheme following the revaluation in April 2000. Before making a decision we need accurate and detailed information on how the revaluation will affect rate bills. This information will be available in the second half of this year, and we shall announce our decision then.

London Underground

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on *(a)* train, *(b)* signal and *(c)* track failures in each year since 1994–95, for all the lines on London Underground. [67904]

Ms Glenda Jackson: London Transport works hard to minimise the incidence of equipment failure and its consequent impact on passenger service. I understand from London Transport that the figures from 1994–95 are as follows:

Summary of numbers London Underground Ltd. train delays: track, signal/points and rolling stock only by incident group and financial year (1994–95/1998–99)

	Signal points	*Other track*	*Rolling stock*
Delays in 1994–95	2,349	659	16,123
Delays in 1995–96	2,494	959	15,102
Delays in 1996–97	2,323	1,007	14,873
Delays in 1997–98	2,725	881	17,801
Delays in 1998–99 (36 weeks only)	1,941	589	14,011

Full 1998–99 statistics are not yet available as London Underground Ltd.'s data collection year covers 1 April 1998 to 31 March 1999. Therefore the 1998–99 figures represents 36 weeks only

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the causes of disruption and delays on London Underground in *(a)* 1995–96, *(b)* 1996–97, *(c)* 1997–98 and *(d)* 1998–99. [67903]

Ms Glenda Jackson: London Transport monitors the causes of disruption and delay to London Underground under eleven categories. Its figures, for the years in question, are as follows:

Cause	*Delays in 1995–96*	*Delays in 1996–97*	*Delays in 1997–98*	*Delays in 1998–99 (36 weeks only)*
Anti-social behaviour	5,254	5,485	5,645	3,775
Passenger ill/injured	608	604	676	539
Person on track	308	327	375	266
Unattended luggage	446	748	482	223
Terminus management	5,276	5,656	8,315	8,709
Driving technique	602	743	747	666
Possession overrun	115	96	114	114
Signal/points	2,494	2,323	2,827	1,941
Other track	959	1,007	907	589
Rolling stock	15,102	14,873	18,088	14,011
All other incidents	1,953	1,505	1,427	1,189
Total	33,117	33,476	39,603	32,022

Full 1998–99 statistics are not yet available as London Underground Ltd's data collection year covers 1 April 1998 to 31 March 1999. Therefore the 1998–99 figures represent 36 weeks only.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on Government plans for the funding of London Underground's investment for 1998 to 2003 and past spending from 1992 to 1997. [67905]

Ms Glenda Jackson: London Transport currently funds investment from a mix of Government grant, operating surplus, and private finance, through which investment in the Underground over the next two years (1998–99 and 1999–00) will be around £1 billion. Under our plans for a public/private partnership for London Underground, our aim is to secure high and stable investment in modernising and maintaining the system, managed and financed by the private sector, under-contracts through which they will be remunerated in accordance with the delivery of required performance levels:

Over the period 1992–1997, Underground investment ran at an historically high level, in large part reflecting spending on the Jubilee Line Extension. But planned investment in the core network was scaled back dramatically in the light of the cuts imposed in the then Government's November 1996 budget. We have made available an extra £365 million grant for 1998–99 and 99–00 to help redress the shortfall in planned investment caused by this cut, and to cover preparation for implementing our public private partnership policy.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made on establishing liability in the case of a serious infrastructure failure on London Underground after concessions have been awarded to private companies. [67906]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Public/Private Partnership contracts that London Underground are currently developing will specify the respective rights and responsibilities of the London Underground operating company and the infrastructure contractors. There will be a simple and robust procedure for allocating responsibility for asset failures that will form part of the day-to-day process for managing the contacts.

Work is still continuing to develop the details, but, if a serious infrastructure failure results in damage to the operating company's property or injuries to its employees or members of the public, the general principle will be that the party responsibility for the failure will bear the financial consequences. An appropriate liability regime and insurance requirements will be put into place.

Rail Passengers (Mobility Difficulties)

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to ensure that train companies provide improved services for passengers with mobility difficulties. [66757]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Rail Vehicle Accessibility Regulations, which came into effect on 1 January this year, require new trains coming into service from that date to be fully accessible to disabled people, including those travelling in wheelchairs.

In addition, the Rail Regulator publishes a Code of Practice "Meeting the Needs of Disabled Passengers" which offers practical advice and guidance to train operating companies on the needs of disabled people. Operators are required to take the Code of Practice into account when producing their Disabled People's Protection Polices for approval by the Regulator, in accordance with the requirements of their operators' licences.

The Strategic Rail Authority will inherit the Rail Regulator's duties relating to disabled passengers.

Mersey Transport Authority

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent discussions he has had with the Mersey Transport Authority; and if he will make a statement. [66756]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have held no recent formal discussions with Merseytravel although they were among many bodies who attend the North West Regional Transport Partnership Meeting in November last year.

Public Transport (Service Levels)

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which private *(a)* bus companies and *(b)* rail companies he has held discussions with during the last 12 months about the standard of services which they provide; and if he will make a statement. [67152]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My colleagues and I have met a number of bus operators over the last 12 months to discuss a range of issues, including standards of service and our policies for promoting bus Quality Partnerships. The Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister of Transport and I met all rail franchisees and Railtrack on 26 November to agree short term measures to improve performance. A larger rail summit will be held on 25 February to look at the long-term improvement of standards across the rail network.

Gloucestershire County Council (Structure Plan)

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he held with Gloucestershire County Council officers and elected representatives about its structure plan before appointing the panel to carry out its examination in public; and if he will make a statement. [67157]

Mr. Raynsford: Officials from the Government Office for the South West met officials of the County Council on various occasions and made formal objections to the deposit draft of the structure plan. I understand the report of the panel, who held the Examination in Public, was published on 11 January. I cannot comment further on the matter as the Secretary of State has a statutory role to play.

Tewkesbury Borough Council (Local Plan)

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with Tewkesbury Borough Council about its Local Plan in the last year. [67061]

Mr. Raynsford: Officials from the Government Office for the South West met officials of the Borough Council to discuss their consultation draft Local Plan last year.

Land Use Planning Requirements

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received following the consultation paper, Draft Town and Country Planning (Control of Major Accident Hazards) Regulations: 1999, to give effect to the land use planning requirements of the EC Directive (96/82/EC); and if he will make a statement. [68083]

Mr. Caborn: The consultation paper on the Draft Town and Country Planning (Control of Major Accident Hazards) Regulations: 1999 was issued on 2 December 1998. To date, 27 responses have been received from business, local government and environmental organisations. A list of responses has been placed in the Library of the House and copies of all the responses have been placed in the DETR library. The Government are considering these responses.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the outcome of the meeting between the Minister of Transport and the Singapore Minister of Communications held on 21 January; and if he will allow bilateral negotiations with Singapore concerning airline services to proceed, notwithstanding the present deadlock in US/UK negotiations. [67652]

Dr. Reid: Mr. Mah Bow Tan, Singapore Minister of Communications, and I had a useful exchange of views during our meeting on 21 January. The bilateral negotiations concerning air service will take place next month as planned.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

National Audit Office

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission what assessment he has made of the steps taken by the National Audit Office to increase public awareness of its work. [65558]

Mr. Sheldon: The Commission attaches considerable importance to public awareness of the work of the National Audit Office and this is essential to the public accountability process.

The National Audit Office has a constructive relationship with the media. Copies of reports are circulated widely along with a short press notice giving details of the key points.

The National Audit Office also publishes an annual report. This is available to journalists, audited bodies, academics, interest groups, professional bodies and the public and can also be found on the Office's web site. The National Audit Office's most recent annual report, *Helping the Nation Spend Wisely*, was published in July 1998 and describes its work and how it has saved the taxpayer more than a billion pounds over the last three years.

In addition the Comptroller and Auditor General and the National Audit Office are always willing to speak, and write, about their work when invited to do so.

DEFENCE

101 Battalion REME (Chorley)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how many elements of the financial assessment of the move of HQ 101 Battalion REME from Chorley to Queensferry had been costed prior to the decision being taken; [65018]

(2) what cost centres his Department plans to take account of when assessing the potential savings of moving HQ 101 Battalion REME from Chorley to Queensferry. [65013]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Prior to the decision being taken to transfer HQ 101 Battalion REME from Chorley to Queensferry, HQ Land Command assessed property disposal values, TA Centres running costs, projected refurbishment/improvement costs, and the cost of providing alternative facilities for those cadet units affected by the restructuring.

Territorial Army

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) on what date the final draft of the Ministry of Defence publication, "Modern Forces for the Modern World: A Territorial Army for the Future" was *(a)* approved by Ministers, *(b)* approved by Commander in Chief Land Command and *(c)* sent for printing; [65011]

(2) when the document on the future structure of the Territorial Army published on 17 November was sent to the printers; and how far in advance of that date the decisions announced therein were taken. [65314]

Mr. Doug Henderson: It was for Ministers to approve the document "Modern Forces for the Modern World: A Territorial Army for the Future", which they did on 4 November. The document was sent to the printers on 6 November and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence was able to announce his decisions on the future of the TA on 17 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns 749–70.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* the average total cost, at full establishment and *(b)* what percentage of that relates to salaries in financial year 1998–99, of (i) an Armoured Infantry Battalion, (ii) Mechanised Infantry Battalion, (iii) Light Infantry Role Battalion, (iv) TA Infantry Battalion, (v) TA Fire Support Battalion, (vi) RAC Armoured Regiment (MBT), (vii) RAC Armoured Reconnaissance Regiment (Scimitar), (viii) TA Reconnaissance (Landrovers), (ix) RA Regiment 1555mm AS90, (x) RA Regiment 105 Light Gun, (xi) RA Regiment MLRS, (xii) RA Regiment Javelin, (xiii) RA Regiment Rapier, (xiv) RA Regiment HVM, (xv) RE Armoured Divisional Engineer Regiment, (xvi) RE Field Squadron, (xvii) RE Amphibious Engineer Squadron, (xviii) RE EOD Squadron, (xix) RE AS Squadron, (xx) TA Field Squadron, (xxi) TA AS Squadron, (xxii) Royal Corps of Signals, (xxiii) Signal Regiment, (xxiv) Independent Squadron, (xxv) TA Independent Squadron, (xxvi) RLC,

(xxvii) General support regiment RLC, (xxviii) Divisional support Squadron, (xxix) Brigade support Squadron, (xxx) TA Ration Squadron, (xxxi) REME Support Battalion, (xxxii) RAMC Field Hospital, (xxxiii) RAMC Field Ambulance, (xxxiv) TA Field Hospital, (xxxv) TA Field Ambulance, (xxxvi) Royal Military Police Company and TA Company, (xxxvii) Intelligence Corps Company and TA Company, (xxxviii) Army Air Corps, (xxxix) Squadron Lynx/TOW and (xl) Headquarters and Staff. [66845]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Armed Forces (Youth Recruitment)

Mr. Berry: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many of those currently serving in the armed forces joined when under 18 years of age. [66221]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The numbers of those serving in the Armed Forces at 1 December 1998 who joined when they were under 18 years of age is as follows:

	Total	*Officers*	*Other Ranks*
Total	83,490	[1]2,560	80,930
Naval Service	18,861	[1]226	18,635
Army	46,608	2,247	44,361
Royal Air Force	18,021	[1]87	17,934

[1] The Naval Service and Royal Air Force figures exclude those Officers who have previously been promoted from the ranks as the relevant data is not held centrally.

HMS Invincible

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if HMS 'Invincible' had a full ship's company on board when she left Portsmouth recently. [66698]

Mr. Doug Henderson: HMS Invincible sailed from Portsmouth with a crew of 635, which represents 96.5 per cent. of her full crew complement.

HMS Intrepid

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects to make a decision on the future of HMS Intrepid. [66699]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Strategic Defence Review confirmed our plans to replace HM Ships Intrepid and Fearless with two new amphibious assault ships early in the next decade. It is planned that HMS Intrepid will remain in service, at low readiness, until 2001. On current plans, she will be replaced by HMS Albion in 2002.

Trident

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much was paid in each of the last five years to the US Government to guarantee the servicing of the UK Trident missile stock; and if this money is part of the estimated Trident running costs. [66825]

Mr. George Robertson: No payments have been made to the US specifically to guarantee the servicing of UK Trident missile stock. I refer my hon. Friend to my reply on 18 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *633*, to his earlier question and to my letter to him of 26 November 1998, a copy of which has been placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how much of the money paid by the UK to the US Government on Trident to be spent during fiscal year 1999 is for items essential to maintain the continued operational availability of the UK Trident system; [67042]

(2) if he will list the items to be purchased from the money authorised recently to be paid to the US Government as the UK share of the fiscal year 1999 Trident procurement programme. [67041]

Mr. George Robertson: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave on 19 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *713*, and to the letter I sent him on 26 November 1998, a copy of which was placed in the Library of the House.

Submarines

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the crew numbers of the Swiftsure class of submarines are up to full complement; how many officers and men are on each submarine; and if he will make a statement. [67249]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Crew numbers for operational Swiftsure submarines are maintained at the full complement level of 16 officers and 121 men. Submarines in refit and not required for sea duty have a reduced ship's company fluctuation around a core of eight officers and 58 men. Currently one of the five S class submarines is in refit and is manned by six officers and 44 men. Reduction in non-operational crew numbers is an approved policy to help maintain operational complements at the full level.

Atomic Weapons Establishment

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library copies of AWE Company Security, Environment, Safety and Health Systems Analysis reports. [67213]

Mr. Spellar: I have arranged for this to be done.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which of his officials is responsible for co-ordinating his Department's action on the millennium bug. [66753]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 21 January 1999]:* As announced to the House last year, the MOD official responsible for our Year 2000 programme is the Director-General Information and Communications Services, Mr. Andrew Sleigh.

National Defence Industries Council

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the membership of the National Defence Industries Council and its working parties; and how these have changed since 1996. [67297]

Mr. Spellar: Membership comprises, on the Government side, Minister and senior officials from the MOD, together with DTI representation. The industry

side consists of a number of senior company representatives, the President or agreed representatives of the four major trade associations in the sector, British Marine Equipment Council, Defence Manufacturers' Association, Federation of the Electronics Industry, Society of British Aerospace Companies, and the Secretary of the Defence Industries Council. All appointments to the National Defence Industries Council are of a personal nature and subject to the approval of the Secretary of State for Defence.

Membership, January 1999

Government

Secretary of State for Defence (Co-Chairman)
Minister for Defence Procurement
Under-Secretary of State for Defence
Permanent Under-Secretary of State
Chief of Defence Procurement
Head of Defence Export Services
Deputy Chief of Defence Procurement (Support)
Chief Scientific Adviser
Minister for Energy and Industry, DTI
Head of Aerospace Division, DTI

Industry

Sir Ralph Robins (Co-Chairman)
Sir Colin Chandler
Mr. Clive Dolan
Lord Simpson of Dunkeld
Sir Richard Evans
Mr. M. Jay
Sir David Lees
Mr. David Marshall
Sir Geoffrey Pattie
Mr. J. E. V. Rose

Membership, February 1996

Government

Secretary of State for Defence (Co-Chairman)
Minister for Defence Procurement
Under-Secretary of State for Defence
Permanent Under-Secretary of State
Chief of Defence Procurement
Head of Defence Export Services
Deputy Chief of Defence Procurement (Support)
Chief Scientific Adviser
Minister for Energy and Industry, DTI
Head of Aerospace Division, DTI

Industry

Sir Ralph Robins (Co-Chairman)
Mr. Ken Batten
Sir Colin Chandler
Sir Barry Duxbury
Mr. Tony Edwards
Mr. Richard Evans
Sir David Lees
Mr. Ian MacBean
Lord Prior
Mr. D. J. Wright.

It would be a daunting task to list the great numbers of names of those who contributed to the important work of NDIC over the past three years and especially in relation to the Strategic Defence Review, SDR.

Military Sales (United States)

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the total value of goods made in and exported from the UK ordered by the US Department of Defense in each of the last 10 years. [67418]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* The MOD is currently working with the FCO and the DTI to prepare the Government's first Annual Report on Strategic Export Controls. The Report will include details of export licence applications for UK Military List items and details of such equipment exported by customer country with annual values. When the Report has been issued I will write to my hon. Friend concerning the information requested for previous years.

Departmental Estates

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the total *(a)* asset and *(b)* rateable value of his Department's property and estates in (i) the UK and (ii) Scotland. [66844]

Mr. Spellar: The total asset value of the UK Department Estate measured in terms of its existing use to the Ministry of Defence as at 1 April 1998, is approximately £12 billion and the Scottish Estate is approximately £1.5 billion.

The total rateable value of the UK Estate is approximately £430 million and that of the Scottish Estate is approximately £49 million.

Both sets of figures include the TAVRA estate.

Private Finance Initiative

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the PFI proposals under consideration in Renfrewshire; and if he will make a statement. [66995]

Mr. Spellar: There is currently one PFI proposal under consideration in Renfrewshire. My Department selected Bannockburn Homes (a Consortium led by John Mowlem and Co. PLC) as the preferred bidder for the provision of Service Family Accommodation for 164 Army families in Central Scotland. Part of the requirement was to be fulfilled by the construction of 61 houses at Craigton Farm, Bishopton, Renfrewshire but on 21 January 1999 Renfrewshire District Council rejected the planning application. Bannockburn Homes, led by Mowlem and Co. PLC are now considering alternative arrangements.

Chemical and Biological Weapons

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his review of actions necessary to ensure a coherent UK response to threats from biological and chemical weapons. [67697]

Mr. George Robertson: This is an important area of work. I will publish the outcome of the review as soon as possible.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the formal programme of co-operation he has agreed with the United States on the threat to armed forces from chemical and biological weapons. [67694]

Mr. George Robertson: A US/UK Joint Venture Oversight Group on the defence response to the threat posed by chemical and biological weapons has been established. The first meeting took place in Washington on 14 December 1998 and agreed the basis on which work would be carried forward in the areas of policy, operational assessment and technical co-operation. We will build on this exchange as a means of developing further the already strong defence capabilities of both countries.

We also continue to value highly our long-standing collaborative arrangements with the US through the trilateral (UK/US/Canada) Memorandum of understanding (MOU) and the quadripartite (UK/US/Canada/Australia) arrangements represented by the Technical Collaboration Programme (TTCP) on chemical and biological defence.

Uranium

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if United Kingdom production levels of highly enriched uranium are adequate to meet current demand; and if he will make a statement. [67696]

Mr. George Robertson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Mr. Iddon) on 25 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *12*.

Lieutenant Colonel K. R. Pople

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will announce the decision on Chapter 62 administrative action being taken against Lieutenant Colonel K. R. Pople. [67695]

Mr. Doug Henderson: No, this action is entirely a matter between the individual concerned and the Army authorities. I would therefore withhold such information under Exemption 12 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information as it relates to the privacy of an individual.

PRIME MINISTER

Ministerial Group on Biotechnology and Genetic Modification

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Prime Minister which Minister is to convene the Ministerial Group on Biotechnology and Genetic Modification; what is the remit of the Group; and to which Minister it will report. [67352]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* The Ministerial Group on Biotechnology and Genetic Modification is a Cabinet Committee chaired by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office. Its terms of reference are to consider issues relating to biotechnology, in particular those arising from genetic modification.

Stephen Lawrence

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Prime Minister if the Government will erect a memorial or name a building in a central part of London in memory of Stephen Lawrence. [67369]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary met Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence on 24 June 1997 and told them that they would have our full support if they wished to establish some form of memorial to their son Stephen.

I understand that Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence have decided that a charitable trust to award scholarships and bursaries to assist young people to study architecture is a fitting way to remember Stephen in a positive way. The Stephen Lawrence Charitable Trust was launched on 11 September 1998 and I was very pleased to send a message of support.

There is also a memorial stone at the bus stop in Eltham where Stephen was attacked.

However, if Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence want a further memorial we would, of course, consider the matter again and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will discuss this with them when he next meets them.

Right hon. Member for Hartlepool

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Prime Minister if he will publish a list of the dates on which he has discussed Government business with the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) since 1 January. [67769]

The Prime Minister: The business of Government is a matter for Ministers; however, I have meetings with hon. Members on a wide range of Government policies, and will continue to do so.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Former Colonies (Public Service Pensions)

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what estimate she has made of the number of UK citizens resident in the United Kingdom who worked in administration, education or other public services in the former colonies who currently rely on pensions from that service for their income. [66630]

Clare Short: As at 15 January 1999, the Department for International Development (DFID) were paying 10,976 service pensions and 7,159 dependants' pensions to UK residents in respect of public service in the former colonies. Those involved are covered by HMG's pension protection arrangements. We do not hold information on the individual pensioner's citizenship, although most are likely to be British nationals. Nor can pension recipients be split by occupation as this information is not held centrally.

In addition to those pensioners paid by DFID, there are many former colonial public servants who do not qualify under these arrangements and who are paid their pensions directly by the present day governments of the former colonial territories. We have no way of knowing the numbers paid in this way.

Jubilee 2000

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the progress of the Jubilee 2000 Campaign. [66900]

Ms Hewitt: I have been asked to reply.

Jubilee 2000 campaigns continue to increase public awareness of the importance of securing effective debt relief for heavily indebted countries.

WALES

National Assembly

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what financial provision he has made for informing the public about *(a)* the voting system for elections to the National Assembly for Wales and *(b)* general information about the Assembly; and if he will make a statement. [66481]

Mr. Michael: An overall budget of some £2 million has been allocated to the National Assembly Information Campaign to ensure that the electorate is able to vote in full knowledge of the Assembly's powers and of how the Additional Member system works. In addition, a public information and Education service will be established within the Office of the Presiding Officer. That service will publish a range of information factsheets to inform the public and educational institutions about the National Assembly. Financial provision for this service has not yet been finalised.

Quangos

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the quangos which were operating in April 1997 which subsequently have had their powers transferred to other quangos. [67232]

Mr. Michael: Since April 1997, the powers of the Development Board for Rural Wales and the Land Authority for Wales have been transferred to the Welsh Development Agency.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what steps he has taken to ensure that emergency services in Wales achieve millennium date change compliance. [67455]

Mr. Michael: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has taken steps to ensure that all necessary measures are taken by the police and fire services in Wales to prepare for the Millennium date change. I have sought to reinforce the sense of urgency and the need for co-operation with local authorities and other public services in preparing for all possible contingencies.

The Welsh Ambulance Trust has responsibility for ensuring Year 2000 compliance of emergency ambulance services. An All Wales Co-ordinating Group has been established to oversee the activities being undertaken by all NHS Trusts and Authorities. The Group is chaired by the Director of the Welsh Office Health Department. An independent assessment of preparations is also being provided by District Audit.

To ensure that there is no material disruption to any of these essential services over the Millennium period, I have invited senior members from the police, fire and NHS in Wales to participate in a high level co-ordinating forum. Representatives from other sectors with responsibility for the provision of key public services will also attend and I will keep progress under close review.

Welsh Development Agency

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what strategic guidance and targets he has set for the enlarged Welsh Development Agency; and if he will make a statement. [68046]

Mr. Michael: I have written to the Chairman of the Welsh Development Agency (WDA) informing him of the revised strategic guidance for the WDA until March 2000 and consolidated targets for 1998–99 following the merger with the Development Board for Rural Wales and the Land Authority for Wales. Copies of that letter have been sent to all right hon. and hon. Members representing Welsh constituencies. Copies have also been placed in the Library of the House.

The strategic guidance is for eighteen months to March 2000; but it will be subject to review by the National Assembly, who will also set targets for financial year 2000–01 and beyond.

The consolidated targets for 1998–99 take account of the half year pre-merger targets set by my predecessor and performance against them. I have, however, asked the WDA fundamentally to review the nature of the targets for 1999–2000 and beyond. In doing this I want the Agency to set very clear objectives which focus its work and reflect the Government's priority of spreading prosperity to all parts of Wales.

Concessionary Bus Fares

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list those councils which issue *(a)* bus passes and *(b)* bus tokens to pensioners. [67284]

Mr. Hain: All authorities in Wales provide bus passes as part of their concessionary travel schemes, with the exception of Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire and Powys who issue tokens. I understand that each of these authorities is considering the possibility of switching from tokens to passes.

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list for each local authority in Wales the amount of money allocated for meeting the costs of concessionary bus fares for pensioners for *(a)* 1999–2000 and *(b)* 2000–01. [67283]

Mr. Hain: It is for local authorities to make financial provision for their concessionary fares schemes from the resources available to them, and authorities will not yet have set their budgets for 1999–2000. Authorities are free to determine the nature of their concessionary fares schemes, although from April, I expect all local authorities in Wales to be operating schemes which at least meet the minimum standard of £5 for a bus pass and half fare for bus travel for pensioners. The increases in net total standard spending announced on 9 December included sufficient funds for this.

Swansea City Council

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what was the outstanding *(a)* total and *(b)* per capita level of loan debt of Swansea City Council at 31 March 1997. [67285]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The table in the official record of the answer I gave on this matter on 19 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *806–07*, excluded the information for Swansea. The complete table including Swansea is as follows:

Outstanding loan debt as at 31 March 1997 [1]

	£000	*£ per head*
Blaenau Gwent	62,544	857
Bridgend	90,155	690
Caerphilly	94,757	560
Cardiff	210,456	668
Carmarthenshire	114,822	679
Ceredigion	44,380	638
Conwy	75,111	679
Denbighshire	69,231	766
Flintshire	102,728	709
Gwynedd	86,287	733
Isle of Anglesey	55,723	831
Merthyr Tydfil	41,480	714
Monmouthshire	44,522	513
Neath Port Talbot	108,393	777
Newport	114,482	837
Pembrokeshire	85,934	756
Powys	101,715	818
Rhondda, Cynon, Taff	139,068	579
Swansea	196,049	852
Torfaen	76,066	841
The Vale of Glamorgan	78,033	657
Wrexham	83,316	666
Wales	2,075,253	710

[1] Outstanding loan debt on council fund. Includes amounts of debt inherited from predecessor authorities for which the authority has agreed to pay financing costs.

Source:

Outstanding loan debt as set out in The Local Government Finance Report (Wales) 1998–99 (Revised)

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Defence Exports

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many people are employed by Government departments and agencies to assist in supporting and promoting defence exports; and at what cost. [66038]

Mr. Spellar: I have been asked to reply.

The Defence Export Services Organisation DESO within the Ministry of Defence is principally responsible for co-ordinating Government support for British defence exports. For Financial Year 1997–98, DESO employed some 680 staff and the gross expenditure was £55.8 million. This was offset by receipts of £34.6 million from customer governments to meet in full the cost of Project Offices dealing with Government-to-Government programmes. Of the remaining £21.2 million, £6.8 million was covered by receipts, leaving a net operating cost attributed to the DESO budget of £14.4 million.

DESO costs are more than offset by benefits to the defence budget arising from DESO activity:

Around £50 million annual cash receipts on average over the last five years from Commercial Exploitation Levy.

About £70–90 million cash annually from disposal sales receipts over the last five years.

Around £400 million in the last financial year saved on procurement costs by spreading fixed overheads across longer production runs.

Other Government Departments carry out activities which support British defence exports but the information requested is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Prepayment Gas Meters

Dan Norris: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to review the standing charges for gas consumers who use prepayment meters. [65970]

Mr. Battle: I believe that it is essential to tackle issues surrounding fuel poverty. In this respect, I have on a number of occasions made my concerns clear to both the Director General of Gas Supply and to the gas industry. Following on from this, the Director General is currently looking at ways of revising of Ofgas Social Dimension Action Plan to identify actions which will provide solutions to the problems of the fuel poor, including looking at ways of reducing the costs of prepayment meters, and at addressing the needs of other low income customers who pay by other methods.

Horizon Programme

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will implement the Horizon Programme throughout the network of Post Office Counters. [65881]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Benefits Agency/Post Office Counters Ltd. automation project was commissioned under the Government's private finance initiative with ICL Pathway Ltd. as the private sector partner. Current plans provide for all post offices to be automated by the end of 2000.

Post Office Licences

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many post office licences, formerly operated by sole traders, have been transferred to multiple retailers in the last two years. [66926]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I understand from Post Office Counters Ltd. that 47 post offices formerly operated by sole traders have been transferred to multiple retailers in the last two years.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many post office licences formerly operated by sole traders have been transferred to Alldays in each Post Office Counters Ltd. region. [66924]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I understand from Post Office Counters Ltd. that 9 post offices formerly operated by sole traders have been transferred to Alldays. The breakdown by Post Office Counters Ltd region is as follows:

Region	*Number*
North Thames Anglia	2
South East	1
South West	5
Scotland	1

Nanny Agencies

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate he has made of the number of nanny agencies operating in the UK. [66932]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I have made no such estimate but I expect to receive their views, along with those of other agencies, on the review to be published shortly of the statutory standards of conduct set under the Employment Agencies Act 1973.

Working Time Regulations 1998

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what publicity the Government have given to the provisions of the Working Time Regulations 1998. [66866]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Department ran a public awareness campaign in the national press in September and October. Guidance material on the new legislation is available free through a number of public outlets (Libraries, Citizens Advice Bureaus etc), on the internet or can be obtained directly on 0845 6000 925.

Garages (VAT Exemption)

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment his Department has made of *(a)* competition policy issues which arise from insurance companies which own their own garages and carry out in-house repairs being exempt from VAT on labour and *(b)* the impact which this has on independent garages; and if he will make a statement. [67247]

Dr. Howells: Under UK competition legislation, the Director General of Fair Trading is responsible for monitoring markets and considering allegations of anti-competitive practices, abuse of monopoly position and restrictive trade practices.

I understand that the possible VAT advantages which may be derived by insurers who carry out repairs in their own in-house body shops were considered by the Director General in 1998 as part of a review of the recommended repairer schemes operated by insurance companies. The Director General concluded that action under the competition legislation was not appropriate.

Questions about exemptions from VAT systems are a matter for Customs and Excise. I understand Customs and Excise are currently looking further at this issue and would welcome evidence of the revenue and employment consequences.

Nuclear Fuel

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew), of 18 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns *364–65*, on nuclear fuel, what is the basis for his statement that the Japanese Government's preferred means of using recovered plutonium is for it to be converted into MOX nuclear fuel. [67099]

Mr. Battle: The policy of the Japanese Government with respect to the nuclear energy industry is set out approximately every five years in a document published by Japan's Atomic Energy Commission. This is called the "Long Term Programme for Research, Development and Utilisation of Nuclear Energy". In the most recent of these documents, published in 1994, the Atomic Energy Commission confirmed Japan's policy on recycling nuclear fuel and noted the need to begin using MOX fuel. More recently, a full review of Japan's nuclear fuel recycling policy was undertaken and culminated in the publication on 31 January 1997 of a policy statement by the Atomic Energy Commission. This policy statement, which was subsequently endorsed by the Japanese Cabinet on 4 February 1997, proposed a prompt start to a programme for using MOX fuel in Japanese light water reactors. The contracts between the Japanese electricity utilities and both BNFL and COGEMA for the supply of MOX fuel are consistent with that programme.

Transco

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how he proposes to use his special share to protect consumers in the impending break up of Transco by British Gas plc. [67336]

Mr. Battle: The effect of the Government's special share in BG plc is to prohibit any person from having an interest in shares which carry 15 per cent. or more of the total votes attaching to the shares in BG plc. Given their market-sensitive nature, significant announcements about policy towards the special share would be made through the Stock Exchange. The interests of consumers are protected through the regulatory system; this is enforced by the Director General of Gas Supply, and is currently under review by the Government.

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he has had with British Gas plc about the break up and sale of Transco. [67335]

Mr. Battle: I meet the Chief Executive of BG plc from time to time to discuss matters of common interest.

German Parcels

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the purchase by the Post Office of German Parcels requires clearance by European or UK regulatory or competition authorities. [66834]

Mr. Ian McCartney *[holding answer 21 January 1999]:* I understand from the Post Office that all necessary clearances have been obtained.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what financial obligations have been incurred by the Post Office in its acquisition of and indirect stake in General Parcel arising from its purchase of German Parcels. [66835]

Mr. Ian McCartney *[holding answer 21 January 1999]:* Through its acquisition of German Parcels, the Post Office has also acquired 23 per cent. of the shares in General Parcel. I understand that there are no material additional financial obligations directly resulting from that shareholding.

Renewable Energy

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to promote exports of renewable energy technologies by United Kingdom companies in the United Kingdom. [67690]

Mr. Battle: My Department assists British renewable energy companies to win export orders worldwide, and since 1995 has had a focused programme of activities including, trade missions, overseas seminars and exhibitions, inward visits, market research and information dissemination. This programme is supported by two dedicated Trade Promoters, who have been concentrating their efforts on target markets such as China, India and Spain. For example, last autumn the Minister for Science opened a renewable energy seminar, and associated trade mission, in Peking. We also take advantage of other opportunities in overseas markets, which in the past year have included, Poland, United States and the Philippines.

British renewable energy exports are estimated to have risen from an historic level of £10-£15 million p.a. in the early 90's to around £80-£100 million p.a. in the last two years.

What further support the Government might give to help UK renewable energy companies to exploit overseas markets is being considered as part of the policy review on renewable energy. I plan to publish a Consultation Paper on the Review shortly, which will set out the options and pose a number of questions to industry and interested parties.

Defence and Security Equipment Exports

Mr. Lock: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list in respect of foreign *(a)* companies and *(b)* Governments which have been given guarantees in relation to defence and security equipment in the past three years (i) the name of the country to which defence and security equipment has been sold, (ii) the level of debt guaranteed for sales to each country in each of the last three years and (iii) the amount of that debt which was paid out by the ECGD in each of the last three years. [66981]

Mr. Wilson *[pursuant to his reply, 25 January 1999, c. 28–29]:* Unfortunately one of the figures given for Oman was wrongly transcribed, instead of an amount guaranteed of £908 million, the figure should read £0.9 million:

£ million

Year	*Country*	*Amount guaranteed*	*Amount paid as claims under these guarantees 1996–97 to 1998–99*
1997–98	Oman	0.9	0

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what visits he or his predecessors have made *(a)* overseas to countries other than EU member states and the applicant countries of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Estonia and *(b)* to Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Estonia since those countries formally applied to join the EU. [67059]

Mr. Byers: Poland and Hungary applied to join the EU in April 1994. Since then the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has made the following visits to countries outside the EU.

Finland—June 1994 (not in EU at that time)
South Africa—July 1994
Korea & Malaysia—October 1994
Japan—January 1995
India—February 1995
Saudi Arabia—March 1995
China—May 1995
Singapore, Thailand & Malaysia—September 1995
USA & Canada—November 1995
India—January 1996
Japan, UAE—April 1996
Russia—May 1996
China & Bahrain—August/September 1996
Mexico & USA—October 1996
Singapore—December 1996
India & Pakistan—January 1997
Japan—May 1997
USA—September 1997
India & Australia—November 1997
China, Hong Kong & Pakistan—January 1998
Moscow—March/April 1998
Switzerland—May 1998
Singapore—June 1998
South Africa—September 1998
USA—October 1998.

SCOTLAND

Lockerbie

11. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the progress of the Crown Office in securing a trial of the suspects of the Lockerbie bombing. [65837]

Mr. McLeish: My noble and learned Friend the Lord Advocate is responsible for the prosecution of the two suspects accused of the Lockerbie bombing. Securing the surrender of the two suspects for trial is, at this stage, a matter within the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth affairs.

Rural Public Transport

13. **Mr. Russell Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to promote increased spending on rural public transport. [65839]

Mr. Macdonald: The Government are providing new resources to support rural public transport over the next three years. £13.5 million will be available through the Rural Transport Fund. As part of this initiative, I am pleased to be able to announce today that I am awarding grants totalling over £500,000 to 22 rural community transport projects. Many different areas of Scotland will benefit, ranging from Wigtownshire in the south to Orkney and Shetland in the north. In addition, local authorities will be able to bid to the Public Transport Fund for rural transport projects. That Fund will provide £90m over three years. From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

19. **Mr. Hood:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to promote increased spending on rural public transport. [65846]

Mr. Macdonald: £13.5 million is being invested over a 3 year period through the rural transport funding package announced last year. Taking the allocations the Government have made from this fund in 1998–99 as a yardstick, totals of £10.5 million would be available to local authorities to provide additional public transport services, £1.8 million for community transport projects and £1.2 million to assist rural petrol stations. I know that this initiative is being warmly welcomed in rural areas, not least because these resources represent additional funding not previously made available. In addition, local authorities will be able to bid to the Public Transport Fund for rural transport projects. The Fund will provide £90m over 3 years. From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Numeracy and Literacy

14. **Mr. Jim Murphy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what measures have been taken to improve performance in numeracy and literacy in Scottish schools. [65840]

17. **Mrs. Irene Adams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what measures he has taken to improve performance in numeracy and literacy in Scottish schools. [65843]

Mrs. Liddell: The early intervention programme, worth a total of £60m over five years, will establish the basic literacy and numeracy skills children will need. We have set targets to raise the level of achievement in literacy and numeracy in line with the national benchmark of 80 per cent. of children achieving the relevant stages in primary school and 75 per cent. at S2. We have invested £30m over three years from the Excellence Fund to support in-service training of teachers with particular emphasis on literacy and numeracy in the P6 to S2 stages, and £15m over three years to support family literacy schemes to help parents to help children to read. From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

New Deal

15. **Mr. Tom Clarke:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the progress of the New Deal in Scotland. [65841]

Mr. Dewar: I am very encouraged by the early results of the New Deal for 18–24-year-olds.

Land Reform

16. **Mr. Paice:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has received on his proposals to change the land ownership legislation in Scotland. [65842]

Mr. Dewar: The proposals which I launched earlier this month have received a wide welcome. Between the more extreme views, there is now a remarkable measure of agreement about the priorities for change.

From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

27. **Mr. Gray:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many landowners in Scotland will be affected by his recommendations for compulsory purchase in his recent land reform proposals. [65854]

Mr. Macdonald: It is expected that use of the new power of compulsory purchase in the public interest would be justified only in exceptional circumstances.

From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to compensate landowners in Scotland who are adversely affected by his proposals for land reform. [65845]

Mr. Macdonald: Under these proposals, where land was acquired compulsorily, appropriate compensation arrangements would necessarily apply.

From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Housing

20. **Mr. Nigel Griffiths:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on housing policy in Scotland. [65847]

Mr. Macdonald: As I announced on 23 November, we shall shortly be publishing a Green Paper on housing in Scotland. The Green Paper will be the first major policy document on Scottish housing in over a decade and will provide a sound basis for the new Scottish Parliament to develop its own policies and programmes. From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Roads Programme

21. **Mr. Home Robertson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on his Department's review of the roads programme. [65848]

Mr. Macdonald: The consultation period on the Government's proposed framework for the appraisal of trunk road investment in Scotland ended on 16 October 1998. The responses have now been analysed and some useful suggestions from respondents incorporated into the appraisal framework. The outcome of the review will be announced as soon as is practicable. From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Economic Prospects

22. **Mr. Lansley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he last met senior representatives of the CBI in Scotland to discuss economic prospects. [65849]

Mr. Macdonald: My right hon. Friend's most recent meeting with CBI Scotland was on 10 September when he was principal guest and speaker at their Annual Dinner. My noble Friend the Minister with responsibility for business and industry met senior officials of CBI Scotland on 11 August and again on 26 October. Scottish Office officials are also in regular contact with CBI Scotland to discuss a range of issues relating to the Scottish economy. Economic development will be devolved to the Scottish Parliament.

Industrial Trends

24. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the most recent quarterly industrial trends survey by the CBI in Scotland. [65851]

Mr. Macdonald: I have noted the results of the January 1999 CBI Scottish Industrial Trends Survey which were released this morning.

With one quarter of the world now in recession, no country is immune from the effects of the current instability in the world economy. I fully appreciate the difficulties this is causing for Scottish manufacturers.

The Government are taking firm action to ensure that the economy is capable of sustained and steady growth. The recent cuts in interest rates are possible because of the tough decisions we have taken.

Small Business Federation

25. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he last met representatives of the Scottish Small Business Federation; and if he will make a statement. [65852]

Mr. Macdonald: Members of the Scottish Office Ministerial Team and officials are in regular contact with the Federation of Small Businesses and have met representatives of the Federation on a number of occasions. Most recently, my noble Friend the Minister with responsibility for business and industry opened the Federation's new premises in Glasgow on 20 October 1998, during which he met members of the Federation's Scottish Policy Team and national officials.

Diabetes

26. **Mr. David Stewart:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he expects to receive advice from the national screening committee about the feasibility of introducing a national screening programme for Type 2 diabetes. [65853]

Mr. Galbraith: The National Screening Committee is currently considering the detailed aspects of this issue. I hope that the Committee will be able to make recommendations to Ministers by the end of this year.

From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the projects currently being considered for PFI funding in Scotland, indicating the number of contracts with performance bonuses as well as penalties built in; which projects are build, own and operate; and if the service costs for PFI projects can be broken down into capital cost and service cost. [66000]

Mr. Dewar *[holding answer 20 January 1999]:* The information requested on projects under consideration for PFI funding and on signed projects which are build, own and operate schemes is set out in the tables.

Precise information on whether a scheme under consideration will be build, own and operate depends on the outcome of negotiations. No contract sponsored by The Scottish Office has a performance bonus regime. Payment mechanisms vary on the basis of usage, availability and performance. In general, payments commence on the delivery of services, with deductions thereafter for non-availability or poor performance. A feature of PFI projects is that they are not separable into components, and so service costs are not a separable element of the overall charge. From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Table 1—PFI projects currently being considered for PFI funding in Scotland

Project name	*Procuring agency*
SGH geriatric medicine and assessment facility	Southern General Hospital NHS Trust Glasgow
Dundee Ninewells Psychiatric Services	Dundee Healthcare NHS Trust
Inverness Psychiatric Unit	Highland Communities NHS Trust
Day Surgery and Maternity Unit	Dumfries and Galloway Acute and Maternity Hospitals NHS Trust
Larkfield Geriatric assessment facility	Renfrewshire Healthcare
Hospital Information Support System	Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh NHS Trust
Cumnock Community Hospital	Ayrshire and Arran Community Healthcare Trust
Car parking facilities	Glasgow Royal Infirmary University NHS Trust
Midlothian Community Hospital	East and Midlothian NHS Trust
Southern General HISS	Southern General Hospital NHS Trust
Replacement of Forfar Infirmary and Whitehills Hospital	Tayside Health Board and Angus NHS Trust
Hawick Cottage Hospital	Borders Community Health Services NHS Trust
Livingston Further Education Centre	West Lothian College
North Ayrshire College, Kilwinning	James Watt College

Table 1—PFI projects currently being considered for PFI funding in Scotland

Project name	*Procuring agency*
Police Force Training Centre, East Kilbride	Strathclyde Police
Office Accommodation	Perth and Kinross Council
Rapid Transport System (CERT)	City of Edinburgh Council
Balfron School	Stirling Council
Dumfries and Galloway Waste Management/Recycling Project	Dumfries and Galloway Council
Mearns Primary and St. Ninian's High School	East Renfrewshire Council
Glasgow Schools Project	Glasgow Council
Argyll and Bute Waste Management Project	Argyll and Bute Council
Glasgow Energy Initiative	Glasgow City Council
Highlands Schools Project	Highland Council
Edinburgh Schools Project	Edinburgh Council
Fife Schools Project	Fife Council
Aberdeenshire Schools Project	Aberdeenshire Council
A701/A702 upgrading	Midlothian Council
A92 upgrading	Angus Council
Glasgow Southern Orbital Road	East Renfrewshire Council
West Lothian Schools Project	West Lothian Council
Larkhall-Milngavie rail route	Strathclyde PTE
Aberdeen, Stonehaven, Fraserburgh and Peterhead Sewage and Sludge Treatment	North of Scotland Water Authority
Daldowie/Sheifldhall Sludge Treatment Centres	West of Scotland Water Authority
Levenmouth Purification Scheme	East of Scotland Water Authority
Tay Projects	North of Scotland Water Authority
Dalmuir Sewage Treatment	West of Scotland Water Authority
Meadowhead (Irvine), Ayr, Stevenston and Inverclyde Sewage Treatment	West of Scotland Water Authority
Moray Coast and Montrose Wastewater Project	North of Scotland Water Authority
Almond Valley, Seafield and Esk Valley Sewage Scheme	East of Scotland Water Authority

Table 2—Signed build, own and operate PFI projects in Scotland

Project name	*Procuring agency*
Inverness Main Drainage/Fort William Sewage Treatment	North of Scotland Water Authority
Stirling FE Centre	Falkirk College
Stonehaven Community Hospital	Grampian Health Board
Hospital Information System	Yorkhill Hospitals NHS Trust Glasgow
Hospital Information System	Perth and Kinross Healthcare NHS Trust
Hospital Information System	Law Hospital NHS Trust
Ferryfield House	Edinburgh Healthcare NHS Trust
Mearnskirk Hospital Geriatric Beds	Victoria Infirmary NHS Trust
New Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh	RIE NHS Trust
Law Hospital	Law Hospital NHS Trust
Hairmyres Hospital	Hairmyres Hospital NHS Trust
Multistorey car park/car parking facilities	Dundee Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust

Notes:
Tables 1 and 2 do not contain those projects which are within Trust and Health Board delegated limits.
Table 2 excludes projects sponsored by Local Authorities.

Mr. Canavan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the disadvantages which are assessed in respect of potential PFI projects in the National Health Service. [65835]

Mr. Galbraith: The current hospital building programme is the biggest in the history of the NHS. It is funded by a mixture of public and private finance. PFI funding is used when projects are affordable, prove value for money, offer improved healthcare and provide significant advantages for patients. From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Energy Efficiency

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on progress in improving energy efficiency in Scottish homes. [65844]

Mr. Macdonald: Under the Government's Warm Deal, £2.5 million was spent last year on improving home energy efficiency in Scotland. This year's budget is just over £6 million and the same amount will be allocated next year. 25,000 households have already benefited and many more will do so. From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Criminal Trials

31. **Mr. Steen:** To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what steps he is taking to expedite trials in criminal cases. [65858]

Mr. Hoon: The Government are taking significant steps to reduce delay in criminal cases.

The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 contains measures to improve case management and bailed defendants will appear in court on the first available day after charge. In addition, fast tracking schemes are being introduced to halve the time from arrest to sentence for persistent young offenders.

The Access to Justice Bill improves publicly funded criminal defence services through the introduction of contracting as well as taking powers to employ salaried defenders.

Land Registry

34. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what is the current workload of the Land Registry; and what assessment he has made of the employment prospects of Land Registry staff as a result of the change in demand and the increased use of information technology. [65862]

Mr. Hoon: The current workload of the Land Registry is 10.8 million transactions for the first nine months of 1998–99. This compares with 9.3 million transactions for the same period in 1997–98 and represents an increase in business of 15.6 per cent.

Employment prospects for Land Registry staff have not changed as a result of its use of information technology. In response to increased property market activity in 1997–98, the Land Registry recruited 330 new members of staff to maintain service level requirements. Over the current financial year, the Land Registry intends recruiting some 240 staff to replace those lost through natural wastage. Information technology has enabled the Land Registry to develop the talents, skill and enthusiasm of its staff to provide a progressively improving service whilst maintaining a workforce in the region of 8,500.

Magistrates Clerks

35. **Mr. John M. Taylor:** To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what representations he has received from interested parties with regard to the proposed changes to the qualifications required of a clerk to a magistrates court. [65863]

Mr. Hoon: My Department has received a number of representations on this matter. As of 15 January 1999 I have received 120 letters from MPs and 107 letters from members of the public. The Department also received 114 responses to the Consultation paper. These included representations from all seven of the representative bodies within the Magistrates' Courts Service.

Guilty Pleas

36. **Caroline Flint:** To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department, what was the average time taken to process guilty pleas for minor offences through the magistrates courts in the last year for which figures are available. [65864]

Mr. Hoon: For summary cases, in which the defendant entered an initial guilty plea, a sample taken in June 1998 found that the average time from first listing to completion was 16 days.

Magistrates

37. **Mr. Peter Bradley:** To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department how many magistrates have been suspended or dismissed in each of the last five years; and if he will provide a breakdown of the main reasons. [65865]

Mr. Hoon: The number of magistrates removed from office by the Lord Chancellor in each of the last five years is as follows:

1994: 4

1995: 1

1996: 3

1997: 13

1998: 11.

The main reasons for removal were:

10 magistrates moved or emigrated and failed to notify the Clerk or resign;

10 magistrates were found to have conducted themselves improperly;

9 magistrates were convicted of criminal offences or had orders made against them in the civil courts.

No magistrates have been suspended by the Lord Chancellor in the last five years, although some have been required to refrain from sitting pending inquiry.

Solicitors

38. **Mr. Sutcliffe:** To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what progress his Department has made in reviewing the current working practices of the Office for the Supervision of Solicitors. [65867]

Mr. Hoon: The Office for the Supervision of Solicitors is an independent body, and its working practices are primarily a matter for the Office. There are no current plans to alter the current arrangements for handling complaints against solicitors. However, the Legal Services Ombudsman oversees the handling of complaints against members of the legal profession, and she has stated in her latest report that although the Office has made some improvements since it started operating in September 1996 there is still a long way to go. When the Ombudsman publishes her next annual report later this year, I will consider whether any further action is necessary.

Legal System (Reforms)

39. **Mr. Hawkins:** To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what cost savings he estimates will accrue from his planned reforms to the legal system and its administration. [65868]

Mr. Hoon: The Government are undertaking a wide-ranging programme of reforms of the legal system and its administration. The most significant elements of that programme are: the establishment of the Community Legal Service and the Criminal Defence Service and the measures to reduce delay in the Court of Appeal (Civil Division) in the Access to Justice Bill currently before Parliament; and the implementation of the first phase of reform of the civil justice system in April 1999.

Saving money is not the Government's objective. The reforms of the system should make it easier for those wishing to resolve disputes to do so effectively.

Those who need to seek assistance from a solicitor should find that costs are more predictable and the risks of litigation much less. No-win no-fee arrangements between lawyers and private clients in more cases will give greater access to justice. Contracting for publicly funded legal services will provide cost effective, quality assured and properly targeted help to those most in need and the taxpayer will get better value for money from what we spend. We will direct resources to areas of greater need or into areas where the market cannot provide necessary services.

Sheriffs

40. **Mr. Hinchliffe:** To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what proposals he has to review the role of sheriffs. [65869]

Mr. Hoon: Sheriffs have a role in the enforcement of High Court judgments. A review of enforcement is currently being undertaken by the Lord Chancellor's Department, which will examine that role in some detail. Work on this stage of the review will begin in July 2000. Any proposals that might change the role of Sheriffs will be subject to full public consultation as and when they arise. I am not aware of any proposals to review the functions that Sheriffs have in addition to their enforcement role.

Law Commission Reports

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the titles and dates of publications of Law Commission reports on which legislation has not been enacted. [67308]

Mr. Hoon: A list is provided. The Law Commission has published 157 Law Reform reports and 18 Statute Law Revision reports, of which 57 have not resulted in legislation or have not been otherwise implemented. Of these, 14 were not intended for legislation and one further report, "Judicial Review and Statutory Appeals (Law Commission Report No. 226)", resulted in minor legislation but for completeness it is included in the list.

Law Commission reports not implemented by legislation

Year	*Number*	*Title*
1966	5	Landlord and Tenant: Interim Report on Distress for Rent[1]
1969	21	Interpretation of Statutes
1970	32	Civil Liability for Dangerous Things and Activities[1]
1973	52	Family Law: first report on Family Property[1]
1973	53	Family Law: Report on Solemnisation of Marriage in England and Wales
1975	65	Transfer of Land: Report on "Subject to Contract" Agreements[1]
1975	67	Report on Obligations of Landlords and Tenants
1977	83	Criminal Law: Report on Defences of General Application
1977	84	Law of Contract: Report on the Proposed EEC Directive on the law relating to Commercial Agents[1]
1978	89	Criminal Law: Report on the Mental Element on Crime
1979	96	Criminal Law: Offences relating to Interference with the Course of Justice
1980	104	Insurance Law: Non-Disclosure and Breach of Warranty
1981	109	Council of Europe Conventions on Foreign Money Liabilities[1]
1981	110	Breach of Confidence
1982	115	Property Law: The Implications of *Williams and Glyn's Bank Ltd. v Boland*
1984	127	The Law of Positive and Restrictive Covenants
1985	142	[illegible]ation of the law of Landlord and Tenant: Forfeiture of Tenancies
1985	143	[illegible]al Law: Codification of the Criminal Law: A Report to the Law Commission
1985	145	[illegible]nal Law: Offences against Religion and Public Worship
1985	149	Criminal Law: Report on Criminal Libel
1985	152	Property Law: Liability for Chancel Repairs
1986	154	Law of Contract: The Parol Evidence Rule[1]
1986	156	Law of Contract: Implied Terms of Contracts for the Supply of Services[1]
1987	158	Third Report on Land Registration. A. Overriding Interests: B. Rectification and Indemnity: C. Minor Interests[1]
1987	162	Landlord and Tenant: Reform of the Law[1]
1987	168	The Law of Domicile
1988	173	Fourth Report on Land Registration
1988	175	Matrimonial Property
1989	177	A Criminal Code for England and Wales
1989	178	Compensation for Tenants' Improvements
1990	191	Transfer of Land: Risk of Damage after Contract for Sale[1]
1991	194	Landlord and Tenant: Distress for Rent
1991	201	Transfer of Land: Obsolete Restrictive Covenants
1991	204	Transfer of Land: Land Mortgages
1992	208	Business Tenancies—A Periodic Review of the Landlord and Tenant Act 1954 Part II
1993	218	Offences against the Person and General Principles
1993	219	Contributory Negligence as a Defence in Contract
1994	221	Termination of Tenancies
1994	222	Binding Over
1994	225	Personal Injury Compensation—How much is enough? A Study of the Compensation Experiences of Victims of Personal Injury[1]
1994	226	Judicial Review and Statutory Appeals[2]
1994	227	Restitution: Mistakes of Law and Ultra Vires Public Authority Receipts and Payments
1995	229	Intoxication and Criminal Liability
1995	231	Mental Incapacity
1995	236	Fiduciary Duties and Regulatory Rules
1996	237	Involuntary Manslaughter
1996	238	Responsibility for State and Condition of Property

Law Commission reports not implemented by legislation

Year	*Number*	*Title*
1996	241	Statute Law Revision: Report on the Chronological Table of Local Legislation[1]
1997	245	Evidence in Criminal Proceedings: Hearsay and Related Topics
1997	246	Shareholder Remedies
1997	247	Aggravated, Exemplary and Restitutionary Damages
1998	248	Corruption
1998	249	Liability for Psychiatric Illness
1998	251	The Rules against Perpetuities and Excessive Accumulations
1998	253	The Execution of Deeds and Documents by or on behalf of Bodies Corporate
1998	254	Land Registration for the Twenty First Century: A Consultative Document[1]
1998	255	Consents to Prosecution

[1] Reports which did not call for legislation
[2] Only part of the report resulted in legislation

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what arrangements are in place in his Department to respond to Law Commission reports; and if he will make a statement. [67307]

Mr. Hoon: Reports which relate to the Lord Chancellor's areas of responsibility are allocated to the Division within his Department's Headquarters most closely concerned with the subjects covered. Progress on each report is monitored, and there are regular meetings between the Commission and senior Departmental staff to clarify issues and discuss how consideration of reports is taken forward.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what staff and other resources in his Department are dedicated to responding to Law Commission reports. [67306]

Mr. Hoon: No staff or other resources are solely dedicated to dealing with Law Commission reports. Because the Law Commission's reports raise issues relating to particular policy areas, they are handled by the police Divisions most closely concerned with the subject.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department when he expects to respond to the Law Commission's report of March 1998 on psychiatric injury. [67309]

Mr. Hoon: I expect that the Government's response to the Law Commission's Report on Liability for Psychiatric Illness will be published within the next three months.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement concerning the backlog of unimplemented Law Commission reports concerning uncontroversial issues. [67305]

Mr. Hoon: Last year, we reviewed all Law Commission reports for which my Department was responsible, and which were then outstanding. I informed this House of the results of that exercise on 19 March 1998, *Official Report*, column *709*, in response to a question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Melanie Johnson). The Lord Chancellor, Lord Irvine of Lairg, provided further information on unimplemented Law Commission reports in another place on 29 July 1998, *Official Report, House of Lords*, columns *201–02*.

Some aspects of the report on *Restitution for Mistake of Law: Ultra Vires Public Authority Receipts and Payments (Law Commission report No. 227)* remain outstanding from that review. We have consulted the Law Commission further on that report, and will publish the Government's response on the remaining matters within the next month.

Of the reports received since that review within the responsibility of my Department, there are two which are unlikely to prove controversial. These concern *The Rules against Perpetuities and Excessive Accumulations of Income (Law Commission report No. 251) and Execution of Deeds and Documents by or on behalf of Bodies Corporate (Law Commission report No. 253)*. We expect to announce our decision on these reports in the spring.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department when he expects to respond to the Law Commission's report of December 1997 on aggravated, exemplary damages. [67310]

Mr. Hoon: I expect that the Government's response to the Law Commission's Report on Aggravated, Exemplary and Restitutionary Damages will be published within the next three months.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what agreements exist between Government Departments and the Law Commission about the timing of responses to Law Commission reports. [67300]

Mr. Hoon: The Law Commission discusses such arrangements separately with the Departments concerned. The Lord Chancellor's Department aims to respond within six months of publication.

Lands Tribunal Appeals

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department how many lands tribunal appeals were lodged between 1 April 1997 and 31 December 1997. [67775]

Mr. Hoon: The Lands Tribunal registered 132 Rating Appeals and 52 Leasehold Reform Appeals between 1 April and 31 December 1997.

Notary Public Services

Mr. Garnier: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what is the Government's policy with regard to the maintenance of the monopoly enjoyed by the Worshipful Company of Scriveners on notary public services in London. [67203]

Mr. Hoon: The Department has obtained the views of interested parties on this issue. My noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor is currently considering whether the monopoly should be abolished. He hopes to be able to announce his conclusions shortly.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Glidewell Report

Mr. Beard: To ask the Attorney-General what progress has been made in implementing the recommendations of the Glidewell report in London. [65859]

The Attorney-General: My answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) on 30 November 1998, *Official Report*, column 67, provided an interim progress report on the consideration and implementation of the recommendations in the Glidewell Report. A chart dealing with individual recommendations is in the Library of the House. Recommendations 54, 55 and 56 are specific to London. Recommendations 54 and 55 have been accepted and are being implemented. Recommendation 56 is under consideration. Work on the recommendations as a whole is currently being taken forward on a national basis. The post of Chief Crown Prosecutor for London and the Assistant Chief Crown Prosecutor posts are being filled through open competition and the selection process has begun. The intention is to make appointments by April 1999. In the meantime, preliminary planning is underway in CPS London to prepare for the implementation of changes locally. This will be taken forward by the new Chief Crown Prosecution for London when he or she takes up the post.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Human Rights

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will indicate *(a)* on what date she sought legal advice on possible conflicts between the recommendations of the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights on contract compliance measures and European Union law, *(b)* on what date advice was received and *(c)* what were the principal conclusions; and if she will place a copy of the opinion in the Library. [64208]

Mr. Ingram: When the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights published its report "Employment Equality: Building for the Future" in June 1997 a working group and number of sub-groups, consisting of senior civil servants and legal advisers, were set up to study and advise Ministers on the Report's recommendations. The working group reported to Ministers on the recommendations on contract compliance in December 1997. Legal advisers were party to that advice but did not provide a specific opinion on the topic.

Child Benefit (Renewal Claims)

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many renewal claims were made for child benefit *(a)* in 1997–98 and *(b)* from 1 April to 31 December 1998; how many (i) have been processed with payments made and order books issued and (ii) are outstanding; and how long it takes to process a renewal claim. [67032]

Mr. McFall: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated to the Social Security Agency under its Chief Executive, Mr. Chris Thompson. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Chris Thompson to Mr. Eddie McGrady, dated 26 January 1999:

I have been asked to reply to your Parliamentary Question about the number of applications for renewal order books for child Benefit.

The number of renewal order books issued for the period 1 April 1997 to 31 March 1998 was 387,636 and for the period 1 April to 31 December 1998 it was 343,356. Figures are not available for those that are outstanding.

Renewal order books are normally issued automatically so there is no need for a renewal claim. While most order books are issued in time to ensure that there is no break in payment, there can be a delay in the issuing if some order books. This occurs when a customer has reported a change in their circumstances and enquiries have to be made to clarify their entitlement to benefit. I am aware that these delays can cause distress to customers and we have recently set up a special section to deal with these cases. This will ensure that the number of such cases are kept to a minimum and are processed as quickly as is possible.

I hope that this explains the position to you.

Northern Ireland Electricity

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps she has taken to ensure that Northern Ireland Electricity *(a)* undertakes a review of existing infrastructure and investment in new infrastructure and *(b)* implements an effective strategy for communications with consumers. [67250]

Mr. Ingram: The Independent Director of Electricity Supply for Northern Ireland has the statutory duty to protect the interests of consumers in respect of the continuity and quality of electricity supply services. He has sought a full and detailed report from Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) to be delivered before the end of January 1999 on the company's response to the problems encountered by consumers over the Christmas holiday period, including the communication arrangements for keeping customers informed during emergencies. He plans to publish the NIE report along with its conclusions on the improvements needed to NIE arrangements for dealing with future emergency situations. The Director also proposes to publish a Consultation Paper seeking views on the proper balance between the costs of supplying electricity and the range and quality of customer services.

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what discussions have taken place with senior management in Northern Ireland Electricity concerning the protracted interruptions to electricity supply over the Christmas 1998 period; and what was the outcome. [67027]

Mr. Ingram: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State met the Chief Executive of Viridian Group plc, the holding company of Northern Ireland Electricity plc, on 6 January 1999. She expressed her concerns about the problems faced by electricity consumers over the Christmas 1998 period and requested an urgent report on

the company's performance in response to the disruptions in supplies. NIE agreed to provide the Secretary of State with the requested report by 31 January 1999.

Belfast Agreement

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what consultations have taken place and with whom regarding the proposed document on the normalisation of security in Northern Ireland as envisaged in the Belfast Agreement. [67488]

Mr. Ingram: Discussions continue through a range of contacts at both Ministerial and official level.

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans she has to publish the proposed document on the normalisation of security in Northern Ireland as envisaged in the Belfast Agreement. [67487]

Mr. Ingram: We intend to publish soon a security strategy paper outlining our approach to normalisation.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

"Girls in Sport"

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment his Department has made of the "Girls in Sport" briefing document prepared by Nike UK in conjunction with Mary Peters, CBE. [64955]

Mr. Banks: I have read Nike UK's briefing document and welcome initiatives that lead to greater participation of women in sport.

Officials in my department have met with Nike UK to discuss the document and the issue of women and sport generally.

I understand that Nike UK will be evaluating responses to its document and publishing its findings in the Spring. I look forward to learning more about this in due course.

Opera Companies Review

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the *(a)* occupations and *(b)* employers of members of the Independent Review of the Future of the Royal Opera House Companies and the English National Opera. [66692]

Mr. Chris Smith: Members of the working group which reviewed the future of lyric theatre in London are listed, together with their occupations and employers, where applicable, at that time. The members were appointed to the working group by the Chairman, Sir Richard Eyre. Appointments were made in a personal capacity, taking into account members' expertise and experience. They did not represent specific organisations.

	Occupation	*Employer*
Chairman		
Sir Richard Eyre	Theatre, Film and TV Director	
Members		
David Brierley CBE[1]	General Manager	Royal Shakespeare Company
Hilary Carty	Director of Dance	Arts Council of England
Mark Elder CBE	Conductor	
Matthew Evans	Chairman	Faber and Faber Ltd
Gavin Henderson[1]	Principal	Trinity College of Music
Melanie Leech	Civil Servant	DCMS
Deborah, Lady MacMillan[1]	Chairman of Dance panel	Arts Council of England
Kathryn McDowell	Director of Music	Arts Council of England
Colin Nears CBE	Chairman of Board	Birmingham Royal Ballet
John Newbigin	Special advisor	DCMS
Trevor Phillips[1]	Television Producer	Noel Gay Television
Michael Ratcliffe	Freelance arts journalist	
Graham Vick	Freelance Director	

[1] denotes current or former member of Arts Council of England

Local Deprivation Indicator

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport which measures of local deprivation his Department and its agencies use in considering allocation of funds to local projects. [66723]

Mr. Chris Smith: A variety of statistics are used by public bodies sponsored by the Department in order to measure deprivation. For example:

Index of Local Deprivation; and

Index of Local Conditions for England and Wales; and various statistics used in Social Trends and Regional Trends.

Other statistics may also be taken into account, e.g., The English Sports Council uses the Index of Local Deprivation plus a table showing 85 local authority areas where there are pockets of urban deprivation together with a list of Rural Development Areas, the poorest non-urban places.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Stephen Lawrence

Mr. Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will investigate the reasons for the length of time taken between the initial report of the

Police Complaints Authority into the police investigation into the murder of Stephen Lawrence and the decision of the PCA on what disciplinary action to take against officers still serving in the Metropolitan Police. [66477]

Mr. Straw: This is a matter for the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis and the Police Complaints Authority (PCA). Following is a chronology of events provided by the Chairman of the PCA.

Date	*Events*
22 April 1993	The murder of Stephen Lawrence
13 February 1997	Complaint from Mrs. Lawrence received by the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) and referred for investigation to the PCA.
18 March 1997	Kent County Constabulary agreed as investigating force. (Deputy Chief Constable Robert Ayling—Senior Investigating Officer, Chief Superintendent David Clapperton—Investigation Officer).
29 September 1997	First contact between the Lawrence family and Kent Constabulary with the Police Complaints Authority.
1 December 1997	The Authority's report made to the Home Secretary under section 97(2) of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act issued to Parliament and the public.
30 December 1997	Statutory statement of satisfaction with the investigation issued by the PCA. Formal conclusion of the investigation.
2 February 1998	Memorandum from the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) under section 90 of the Act received by PCA. This memorandum contains the recommendations of the force as to disciplinary outcomes of the investigation.
10 March 1998	PCA responds to MPS recommending charges of Neglect of Duty against DI Bullock and other informal disciplinary recommendations.
12 March 1998	Lawrence family informed of recommendations DI Bullock made aware of charge.
16 March 1998	Sir William Macpherson requests further action in disciplinary proceedings be delayed until his inquiry concludes Part 1.
May/June 1998	Correspondence/meetings between MPS and PCA as to whether MPS could respond to the PCA's recommended charges before or after the conclusion of Part 1 of the Macpherson Inquiry.
6 July 1998	Agreement reached that MPS would now respond to PCA recommendations in view of the completion of Phase 1 of the Macpherson Inquiry.
20 July 1998	MPS formally accepted charges in principle against DI Bullock.
21 October 1998	MPS respond with proposed charges against DI Bullock having taken counsel's advice.
November/December 1998	PCA recommended that further charges from MPS were insufficient to cover alleged matters of neglect by DI Bullock.
	Correspondence/discussion re further suggested charges. PCA decided to prepare detailed charges rather than accept MPS proposals.
4 January 1999	Final suggested charges submitted to MPS by PCA.
7 January 1999	Detailed charges, now 7 in number, accepted by MPS.
12 January 1999	PCA Press release announcing the number of charges and the direction that they will be heard by tribunal.

Ministerial Expenditure

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) when the investigation which he has announced into claims of excessive expenditure by the right hon. Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) will be completed; [66922]

(2) if the results of the investigation into claims of excessive expenditure by the right hon. Member for Copeland will be published; [66921]

(3) who will conduct the investigation he announced on 17 January into claims of excessive expenditure by the right hon. Member for Copeland; [66923]

(4) if he will list the terms of reference of the investigation into claims of excessive expenditure by the right hon. Member for Copeland; [66920]

(5) if the investigation into the claims of excessive expenditure by the right hon. Member for Copeland will take evidence from third parties. [66925]

Mr. Straw: The hon. Member is misinformed. I have not announced any investigation into the matter referred to. I said that there has now been a complaint and of course there will be a response. That response is now contained in the letter from my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to the hon. Member dated 20 January, a copy of which has been placed in the Library.

Young Offender Institutions

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to reduce the length of time in each day for which remand prisoners in young offender institutions remain locked in their cells. [67045]

Mr. George Howarth: The Government are investing substantial funds to develop more effective regimes in Prison Service establishments. They are determined to pursue active regimes in establishments holding young people as part of their commitment to focus the youth justice system on the prevention of offending by young people. The Prison Service is currently working on new regime standards and the creation of a distinct estate for boys aged 15 to 17 in consultation with the Youth Justice Board. These measures will better meet the needs of the young people and provide a more purposeful and active day. An assessment is also underway of the needs of girls under 18 years old.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the average length of time prisoners on remand in young offender institutions spent in custody awaiting disposal of their case in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [67044]

Mr. George Howarth: The available information for all untried and convicted unsentenced young persons held in prisons in England and Wales is given in the table.

Estimated average time spent in custody for untried and convicted unsentenced young persons in prisons in England and Wales, 1994–98 [1]

	Estimated average number of days in custody [1]			
	Untried [2]		*Convicted unsentenced* [3]	
Year	*Males*	*Females*	*Males*	*Females*
1994	46	31	30	26
1995	42	32	34	29
1996	42	32	31	29
1997	41	37	28	25
1998[4]	36	24	37	25

[1] Estimated from number of receptions and average population

[2] Time spent in Prison Service establishments before conviction

[3] Time spent in Prison Service establishments after conviction

[4] Provisional figures

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will introduce a requirement that all asylum interviews are tape-recorded. [67094]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: My officials are considering the practical implications of piloting the tape-recording of asylum interviews. I will advise the House of my conclusions shortly.

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) when he expects to have disposed of the outstanding applications for asylum made between 1 July 1993 and 31 December 1995; [67110]

(2) when he expects to have disposed of the outstanding asylum applications made before 1 July 1993. [67096]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I would refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) on 18 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *332*.

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish guidelines to staff on implementing the new policy of considering compassionate circumstances at all stages of an asylum case. [67095]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: As we made clear in our White Paper "Fairer, Faster and Firmer—A Modern Approach to Immigration and Asylum" published in July, we are developing criteria which would allow due weight to be given to compassionate factors in cases involving children, including cases of asylum claims, where refusal of leave to remain would otherwise be the appropriate course. Once the criteria are decided, instructions given to staff will be published.

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the average length of time from asylum application to initial decision in each year since 1980. [67117]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Information from 1984 onwards is given in the table. Regretfully, information for earlier years is not available.

Average decision times in months, 1984–1998 [1]

Year of decision	*All applications* [2]	*Applications lodged pre-July 1993*	*Applications lodged post-July 1993*
1984	3	3	n/a
1985	9	9	n/a
1986	13	13	n/a
1987	14	14	n/a
1988	18	18	n/a
1989	13	13	n/a
1990	13	13	n/a
1991	16	16	n/a
1992	20	20	n/a
1993	20	20	2
1994	17	28	6
1995	18	42	9
1996	17	53	12
1997	22	65	15
1998	17	79	12

[1] The average length of time (in months) relates to the year in which the decisions were made.

[2] Excluding dependants

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the lowest Civil Service grade at which a decision to refuse asylum may be made. [67113]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Asylum decisions are taken by trained officers at the appropriate grade depending on the complexity of the issues raised. For the majority of decisions, a decision to refuse would not be taken below the level of executive officer, but in some less complex cases a decision to refuse would be taken by an administrative officer.

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if an individual who has been granted exceptional leave to remain will be entitled to apply for reunion with family members abroad within four years. [67093]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Under the family reunion concession, those who have been granted exceptional leave to remain in the United Kingdom may be joined by their pre-existing spouse and minor dependant children after they have spent four years in the United Kingdom provided that they can meet the maintenance and accommodation requirements of the Immigration Rules. Consideration is also given to allowing other family members to join a sponsor in the United Kingdom if there are compelling compassionate reasons for doing so.

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum applications made between 1 July 1993 and 31 December 1995 have been disposed of to date; and with what result. [67111]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information is given in the table.

Asylum applications made between 1 July 1993 and 31 December 1995 by status as at the end of 1998 [1]

Case status as at 31 December 1998	
Granted asylum (%)	6
Granted exceptional leave (%)	13
Refused after full consideration (%)	69
Refused on 3rd Country grounds (%)	4
Para 340 refusal[2] (%)	8

Asylum applications made between 1 July 1993 and 31 December 1995 by status as at the end of 1998 [1]

Case status as at 31 December 1998	
Total with decisions[3]	62,000
Undecided[3]	25,800
Total applications[3]	87,700

[1] Percentages are estimates, rounded to the nearest whole number, based on cases for which information is recorded.
[2] Paragraph 340 of Immigration Rules. For failure to provide evidence to support the asylum claim within a reasonable period, including failure to respond to invitation to interview.
[3] Rounded to the nearest 100, excluding dependants.

Young Remand Prisoners

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the average length of time spent by young people held in custody on remand before their case was decided in the last year for which figures are available. [67224]

Mr. George Howarth: The information requested is given in the table.

Estimated average time spent in custody for untried and convicted unsentenced young persons in prisons in England and Wales in 1998 [1]

	Estimated average number of days in custody [2]			
	Untried [3]		*Convicted unsentenced* [4]	
Year	*Males*	*Females*	*Males*	*Females*
1998	36	24	37	25

[1] Provisional figures
[2] Estimated from number of receptions and average population
[3] Time spent in Prison Service establishments before conviction
[4] Time spent in Prison Service establishments after conviction

Juvenile Prison Establishments

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the juvenile prison establishments which have workshops in England and Wales. [67221]

Mr. George Howarth: Establishments in England and Wales holding sentenced juveniles which have workshops are set out as follows.

Prison establishments with workshops holding sentenced juveniles

Name of establishment

Castington
Dover
Drake Hall
Feltham
Glen Parva
Highpoint
Hindley
Holloway
Lancaster Farms
Low Newton
Moorland
New Hall
Onley
Portland
Stoke Heath
Styal[1]
Swinfen Hall
Werrington.

[1] Workshop currently used only by adult prisoners.

Prisoners (Young People)

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many boys aged *(a)* under 15, *(b)* 15, *(c)* 16 and *(d)* 17 years are currently imprisoned in adult prisons in England and Wales. [67231]

Mr. George Howarth: The currently available information relates to the population on the last day of December 1998 and is given in the table. Young persons held in adult prisons are normally accommodated separately from adults.

Persons aged under 15 years are not held in Prison Service establishments but are remanded to local authority accommodation. This information is published in a Department of Health publication entitled "Children accommodated in secure units" (reference A/F 97/21). This information is presented on a financial year basis with the last report covering the year ending 31 March 1997.

Population of 15, 16 and 17 year old males in adult prisons on 31 December 1998 [1]

Age	*Number*
Under 15	—
15	25
16	57
17	254

[1] Provisional figures

Young Prisoners (Suicides)

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many of those people aged under 18 years who committed suicide in prisons in England and Wales last year were *(a)* being held in adult gaols and *(b)* on remand. [67218]

Mr. George Howarth: Regrettably, three apparent self-inflicted deaths occurred last year among those aged under 18 years in prisons in England and Wales, of which one was in a young offender unit of an adult prison. Two of the prisoners were unsentenced.

The inquest on the first death returned a verdict of suicide. The inquests on the remaining two deaths have not yet been held.

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to reduce the incidence of suicide among people aged under 18 years in prisons in England and Wales. [67217]

Mr. George Howarth: The Government are committed to doing everything possible to reduce the incidence of suicide in prisons. My noble Friend, Lord Williams, chairs a regular meeting between the Prison Service and a range of representatives from groups interested in prison suicides including: the Samaritans; Howard League; Prison Reform Trust; Inquest; and the Board of Visitors, to discuss how they can work more closely together.

The Prison Service is currently re-examining instructions and guidance on caring for the suicidal to be issued as a new Prison Service Order (PSO). The special needs of under 18 year olds will be considered as part of that review. In addition, the Prison Service is currently developing new regime standards for under 18 year olds in consultation with the Youth Justice Board. These, along with the creation of a distinct juvenile estate, will improve the standard of care and quality of regimes for remanded and sentenced juveniles held in Prison Service accommodation.

We welcome the current thematic review of suicide and self-harm conducted by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons, the report of which is soon to be published. We look forward to any recommendations he has in this important area of work.

Prisons (Probation Service)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisons in England and Wales do not have a probation service operating within the prison; and if he will make a statement. [67222]

Mr. George Howarth: Probation services operate in all prison establishments.

Immigration and Nationality Directorate

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what provision he has made for additional staff at the Immigration and Nationality Directorate during the transfer of files from Croydon. [67240]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: About 42 staff were made available to help with moving files out of Lunar House (which is to be refurbished). Crating and transportation of files was carried out by a commercial contractor.

Deportation Orders

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 18 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *330*, on deportation orders, if he will give the reasons for the deportation orders not having been given effect. [67337]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Reasons for orders not being given effect could be established only by examining each case individually at disproportionate cost. However, a delay may arise for one or more of the following reasons: an appeal or other legal challenge, an asylum application, difficulties in obtaining a travel document, the subject has still to complete a custodial sentence or cannot be traced. Some of the latter may have left the country without informing the Immigration Service. Orders issued later will inevitably be activated outside the reference period.

Prison Service (Learmont Report)

Ms Ryan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to respond to the report of General Sir John Learmont on the Prison Service; and if he will make a statement. [68123]

Mr. Straw: General Sir John Learmont's report on the escapes from Parkhurst and the management of the Prison Service has had a huge impact. His findings, together with those of Sir John Woodcock's inquiry into the escape from Whitemoor in September 1994, have led to greatly improved physical security and a significant change in the way staff in prisons consider security as they go about their day to day tasks. The number of escapes, the measure by which the Prison Service is most often judged by the public, has dropped significantly since the report.

Of the 127 recommendations on prison security and the management of the Service, 118 have been accepted in full, in part or with some qualifications. The position on each recommendation is set out in a document which has been placed in the Library. Those recommendations which have been accepted but have not yet been implemented in full will be taken forward within existing resources. A revised Security Manual has now been published which will tie up a number of outstanding matters. I have decided not to accept Sir John's proposals for a High Security prison and a control prison, in the light of the significant improvements to security in the Category A estate and improvements in the management of the most seriously disruptive prisoners.

There remains one substantive recommendation on which I have asked for further work to be done—No. 63, proposing that all staff, including Governors, should normally wear uniform. I hope to be able to announce a decision on this recommendation soon and a final report on the outcome of this inquiry will be provided then.

Illegal Lotteries

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 20 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *482*, if he will list the *(a)* names and *(b)* location of those magistrates' courts where prosecutions for lottery offences under sections 2, 3, 4, 13 and 14 of the Lotteries and Amusements Act 1976 were tried in each of the years between 1994 and 1997, indicating the outcome of each hearing. [67587]

Mr. George Howarth: As the tables containing the information that we have from court reports are long, they have been placed in the Library.

Parades

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will collate and publish data from police authorities on *(a)* the number of towns in which St. Patrick's Day parades are held each year, *(b)* police estimates of the number of participants in parades of over 1,000 persons for each of the last 10 years and *(c)* the number of parades which raised public order concerns. [66963]

Mr. Boateng: This information is not held centrally. There are no plans to request this information from police authorities, which could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Correspondence (Political Impartiality)

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidance he has issued to his Department's officials on the inclusion of party political material in correspondence; how he monitors the political impartiality of his officials with respect to the letters they send out; and if he will make a statement. [67153]

Mr. Straw: Civil servants are required under the terms of the Civil Service Code to conduct themselves with integrity, impartiality and honesty, and in such a way as to deserve and retain the confidence of Ministers and potential future Ministers. This is supported by a duty placed on Ministers not to use public resources for party political purposes, to uphold the political impartiality of the Civil Service and not to ask civil servants to act in any way which would conflict with the Civil Service Code.

If the hon. Member has a specific letter in mind and would like to give me the details I will of course consider the matter very carefully.

HEALTH

Blood Products

Mr. Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what advice the Chief Medical Officer has issued to *(a)* public officials, *(b)* civil servants and *(c)* Ministers facing the risk of infection with hepatitis A on overseas visits, on the choice to be made between British-derived γ-(gamma-)globulin and the alternative hepatitis A vaccine. [61058]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 27 November 1998]:* Advice to all these groups is the same as for other travellers.

Mr. Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what efforts have been made to obtain alternative supplies of hepatitis A vaccine as an alternative to British-derived γ-(gamma-)globulin; and with what results. [61052]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 27 November 1998]:* There are circumstances where Hepatitis A vaccination is not clinically appropriate because of the time delay between its administration and the resulting protection becoming effective.

Two licensed Hepatitis A vaccines and non United Kingdom sourced gammaglobulins are already available.

Mr. Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will assess the advantages and disadvantages of banning the use of British-derived γ-(gamma-)globulin; [61055]

(2) what assessment he has made of the advantages of a ban on the use of British-derived Anti-D. [61048]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 27 December 1998]:* On 26 February 1998 the Committee on Safety of Medicines advised that the National Health Service Bio Products Laboratory and the Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service's Protein Fractionation Centre take steps to source products from plasma derived from outside the United Kingdom including Anti-D and gamma globulin. The Committee further advised that this should be done within a timeframe to be agreed with the committee, giving regard to the effects on the supply of all products but especially of vital and less readily obtainable life saving products. In the meantime, the Committee did not advise withdrawal of licensed UK sourced Anti-D and gamma globulin products. I have accepted the Committee's advice and will keep the matter under review in the light of any further advice or changed circumstances.

Mr. Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what assessment he has made of the risk of contamination of British-derived γ-(gamma-)globulin stocks within the NHS with the infective agent of new variant CJD; [61056]

(2) what assessment he has received of the risk of contamination of British-derived Anti-D stocks within the NHS with the infective agent of new variant CJD. [61049]

Ms Jowell: *[holding answer 27 November 1998]* The Committee on Safety of Medicines (CSM) completed its review of the sourcing of blood products in May and advised that the theoretical risk that new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease could be transmitted by blood products could not be discounted. The Committee further advised that The National Health Service Bio Products Laboratory and the Protein Fractionation Centre should move to sourcing products from plasma derived outside the United Kingdom within a time frame agreed between the CSM and giving due regard to the need for uninterrupted supply of all products including Anti-D and gammaglobulin.

Mr. Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with the Canadian Government on the importation of British blood products into that country. [61146]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 27 November 1998]:* We have had no such discussions with the Canadian Government.

No officials at the National Blood Authority (including the Blood Products Laboratory) have had discussions with the Canadian Government about the issue of importing blood products from the United Kingdom to Canada.

However, officials will continue to maintain close contact with their counterparts in Canada and a number of other countries on issues related to blood products.

Mr. Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what efforts have been made to obtain alternative supplies of ready-made Anti-D from foreign sources; and with what results;

(2) what efforts have been made to obtain alternative supplies of ready-made γ-(gamma-)globulin for hepatitis A protection from foreign sources; and with what results. [61051]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 27 November 1998]:* In the case of anti-D it is crucial to maintain licensed supplies of this essential treatment and non United Kingdom sourced product made in this country will be available from mid 1999. In the meantime one licensed non UK derived product is already available, and we are exploring other sources. There are currently adequate supplies of licensed non UK sourced gammaglobulin products in the country.

The Department's advice to doctors on all issues relating to immunisation is contained in "Immunisation against infectious disease" (1996) and is an Her Majesty's Stationery Office publication. This advice states that active immunisation with Hepatitis A vaccine is the preferred method of protection against Hepatitis A infection.

Spongiform Encephalopathy (Transmission)

Mr. Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the methods available to prevent transmission of spongiform encephalopathy between animals are suitable to be used for humans. [61057]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 27 November 1998]:* No. The potential of prophylactic medicines has been demonstrated in rodents under laboratory conditions, but has not been developed for use in natural disease in either animals or humans.

In so far as modes of transmission of spongiform encephalopathies are understood, any prevention or control measure must be carefully evaluated for its safety and efficacy (by research study where appropriate). This would be necessary to establish whether it has wider applicability beyond the species in which its effectiveness had apparently been demonstrated.

Mr. Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he is taking to implement the recommended autoclave regime set out in Annex B, Table B.1 of the joint Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens/ Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee Working Group document entitled "Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathy Agents: Safe working and the prevention of infection". [61059]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 27 November 1998]:* The recommended autoclave regime set out in Annex B, Table B1 re-iterates previous advice from the Department, first issued in 1981. Therefore, the autoclave regime in itself is not new advice. The main change in the 1998 guidance with respect to surgical instruments is to advise disposal of all instruments used on patients with clinical symptoms of Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease and not just those used for neurological and ophthalmological surgery.

The Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens/ Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee guidance gives advice to employers on the precautions needed to comply with the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations with respect to the agents of Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies.

The Department has publicised the updated guidance. In particular, on 28 April 1998 the Department's Deputy Chief Medical Officer wrote to the National Health Service announcing publication of the updated guidance. He asked that it be drawn to the attention of relevant staff, specifically those with responsibility for infection control and those responsible for re-processing medical devices. In his letter he highlighted that the annexe on decontamination would be particularly relevant.

It is the responsibility locally of trusts to ensure that such guidance is adhered to.

Consultation Document MLX 249

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to ensure that the Medicines Control Agency proposals set out in consultation document MLX 249 are modified to include a right of independent appeal against Medicines Control Agency decisions. [65176]

Ms Jowell: How the review panel is constituted, and its terms of reference, form an important part of the proposals. We will consider carefully all responses on these issues before deciding whether and what legislation should be brought before Parliament.

Accident and Emergency Services

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what levels of spare capacity in terms of *(a)* beds and *(b)* staff hospitals are advised to maintain to meet surges in demand for accident and emergency services. [65493]

Mr. Hutton: We have published guidance and good practice on managing emergency pressures in the emergency services action team (ESAT) reports of 1997 and 1998. Within this broad framework it is for health authorities and National Health Service trusts to balance services to meet emergency demand throughout the year. Copies of the ESAT reports are available in the Library.

Appointments

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list all NHS trust and health authority appointments which were not made by the due date and which remained outstanding on 1 January. [65768]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is shown in the table.

List of Health Authority and National Health Service Trust appointments which expired in 1998 and for which no appointment had been made by 1 January 1999

Region	*Body*	*Number of chairs*	*Number of non-executives*
Eastern	Addenbrookes NHS Trust	0	1
	Essex Rivers Healthcare NHS Trust	0	1
	Horizon NHS Trust	0	1
	Kings Lynn and Wisbech Hospitals NHS Trust	0	2
	West Herts Community Health NHS Trust	0	1
North West	Burnley Healthcare NHS Trust	1	1
	Chester and Halton Community NHS Trust	1	2
	Christie Hospital NHS Trust	1	2
	Clatterbridge Centre for Oncology NHS Trust	1	2
	Liverpool Women's Hospital NHS Trust	0	1
	Manchester Health Authority	0	1
	Mancunian Community Health NHS Trust	1	1
	Oldham Hospital and Community Services NHS Trust	0	2
	Tameside and Glossop Community and Priority Services NHS Trust	0	1
	Warrington Community NHS Trust	0	2
	Wirral Hospital NHS Trust	1	1

List of Health Authority and National Health Service Trust appointments which expired in 1998 and for which no appointment had been made by 1 January 1999

Region	Body	Number of chairs	Number of non-executives
Northern and Yorkshire	Calderdale and Kirklees Health Authority	0	1
	North Cumbria Health Authority	0	2
London	BHB Community Healthcare NHS Trust	0	1
	City and Hackney Community Services NHS Trust	0	2
	Croydon Community Health NHS Trust	0	1
	Enfield Community Care NHS Trust	0	1
	Hillingdom Hospital NHS Trust	0	2
	King's Healthcare NHS Trust	0	1
	Mayday Healthcare NHS Trust	0	1
London	Moorfields Eye Hospital NHS Trust	0	1
	North Middlesex Hospital NHS Trust	0	1
	Pathfinder Mental Health Services NHS Trust	0	1
Trent	Central Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust	0	1
	Grantham and District Hospital NHS Trust	0	1
	Leicestershire Health Authority	0	1
	Queen's Medical Centre, Nottingham, University Hospital NHS Trust	0	2
South East	East Surrey Health Authority	0	2
South West	Bath Mental Healthcare NHS Trust	0	1
	Gloucestershire Ambulance Service NHS Trust	0	1
	Gloucestershire Royal NHS Trust	1	0
	Royal United Hospital Bath NHS Trust	0	1
West Midlands	Birmingham Heartlands and Solihull (Teaching) Hospitals NHS Trust	0	1
	Walsall Community Health NHS Trust	0	1
	Warwickshire Health Authority	0	1
	Total	7	50

Haslar Hospital

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what investment his Department has made in facilities at the Royal Naval Hospital, Haslar in each of the last five years. [65782]

Mr. Denham: The Department has made no investment in the facilities at the Royal Hospital Haslar in any of the last 5 years.

The Portsmouth Hospital National Health Service Trust and Royal Hospital Haslar work closely together and staff from both organisations work across both hospital sites. Doctors provide cover in certain specialties and staff are exchanged, in particular in cardiology and urology. No revenue transfer is involved. Haslar charges the NHS trust for the use of its magnetic resonance imaging scanner.

"Our Healthier Nation"

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to extend all relevant targets outlined in the Green Paper: "Our Healthier Nation", to include those aged 65 to 79 years. [66336]

Ms Jowell: The "Our Healthier Nation" Green Paper proposed four targets for improving health, three of which were expressed as reductions of mortality for people under 65. We received over 5,500 responses to the consultation, many of which commented on the implications of the proposals for older people and on the age range of the proposed targets.

We are currently developing the "Our Healthier Nation" White Paper taking full account of the consultation responses, including those relating to age limits on the targets. We plan to publish the White Paper in the spring.

Pain Killers (Pack Sizes)

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will review the impact of new regulations on aspirin and paracetamol pack sizes; what action he will take to ensure that pharmacists are aware of their discretion to supply up to 100 tablets at a time without a prescription; and if he will make a statement. [66674]

Ms Jowell: The Medicines Control Agency (MCA) is monitoring the impact of the new regulations on paracetamol and aspirin pack sizes and will review the effectiveness of the measures once sufficient data have been collected.

The pharmacist's discretion to supply up to 100 tablets or capsules at a time without a prescription was publicised by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain, the professional body for pharmacists, in August 1998 in their publication, the Pharmaceutical Journal. The MCA will be highlighting the availability of this discretion in an article it will shortly be submitting to the Journal on this and other issues relating to the introduction of the new pack sizes.

NHS Litigation Authority

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the role and responsibilities of the NHS Litigation Authority. [66580]

Mr. Denham: The National Health Service Litigation Authority (NHSLA) is a special health authority established in November 1995. Its principal task is to administer schemes set up under Section 21 of the NHS and Community Care Act 1990 to allow NHS bodies to

pool the cost of injury, loss or damage to property and liabilities to third parties arising from the carrying out of their functions. The NHSLA administers three schemes:

a scheme covering liabilities for alleged clinical negligence where the incident occurred after 1 April 1995 (the clinical negligence scheme for NHS trusts);

a scheme relating to existing incidents which occurred before that date (the existing liabilities scheme); and

a scheme to manage residual clinical negligence liabilities of regional health authorities from 1 April 1996.

From 1 April 1999 the NHSLA will also be responsible for establishing a scheme to provide cover for non-clinical risks.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the names and remuneration of the members of the NHS Litigation Authority. [66579]

Mr. Denham: The membership of the National Health Service Litigation Authority is as follows.

Sir Bruce Martin QC (Chairman);

Mr. Steve Walker (Chief Executive);

Mr. Ian McQuattie (Director of Finance);

Mr. John Speedman (Non-Executive);

Mr. R. S. Bradshaw (Non -Executive).

The accounts for 1998 show that the Chairman's remuneration was £19,285 and the chief executive's remuneration was £81,614 (including benefits and pension contributions). Other members received remuneration in the ranges:

£0–5,000: 2

£5,001–10,000: 0

£10,001–20,000: 1

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health in how many cases since 2 May 1997 the NHS Litigation Authority has recommended the discontinuance of alternative disputes resolution proceedings; and if he will make a statement. [66582]

Mr. Denham: The National Health Service Litigation Authority has authorised discontinuance on one alternative dispute resolution proceeding since 2 May 1997. I have written to the hon. Member separately on that case. The NHS Litigation Authority actively promotes alternatives to litigation for resolving disputes wherever possible.

Medical Negligence

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his policy towards the use of alternative dispute resolution procedures to deal with allegations of negligence in the NHS. [66581]

Mr. Denham: We are keen to find improved ways of handling clinical negligence claims which do not involve litigation. The National Health Service Executive launched pilot mediation schemes in the Anglia and Oxford and Northern and Yorkshire regions in April 1995 with the aim of exploring the scope for mediation as an appropriate alternative to litigation in the resolution of clinical disputes. The pilots ended last year and an evaluation project is in the final stages of reporting. We will look carefully at the findings and particularly whether there is scope to extend the use of mediation in the NHS.

Funding

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance his Department *(a)* gives and *(b)* intends to give to NHS authorities to take full account of the clinical and cost effectiveness of new and current health interventions when making decisions on funding. [66741]

Mr. Denham: Priorities and planning guidance is issued annually to health authorities. We expect all decision makers in the National Health Service—including health authorities—to take account of clinical and cost effectiveness when making decisions on clinical care.

We are setting up the National Institute for Clinical Excellence which will, for the first time, provide the NHS with a single, coherent source for the development and dissemination of guidance about clinical and cost effectiveness.

NHS Trusts (Cheshire)

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many members on the *(a)* North Cheshire Health Authority, *(b)* Warrington Community Health Trust and *(c)* Warrington Hospital NHS Trust are resident in (i) the Warrington, North constituency, (ii) the Warrington, South constituency and (iii) other areas. [66832]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 21 January 1999]:* One non-executive member of the North Cheshire Health Authority currently resides in the Warrington, North constituency, two reside in Warrington, South and two in other constituencies. The remaining non-executive post is not filled at present.

One non-executive member of Warrington Hospital National Health Service Trust currently resides in the Warrington, North constituency, three reside in Warrington, South and two in other constituencies.

Two non-executive members of Warrington Community National Health Service Trust currently reside in the Warrington, North constituency, and two reside in the Warrington, South. The remaining two non-executive posts are not filled at present.

Fluoridation (Northumbrian Water)

Mr. Peter Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the cost of the judicial review being brought by Newcastle and North Tyneside Health Authority against Northumbrian Water over the company's refusal to fluoridise water supplies. [65958]

Ms Jowell: The Newcastle and North Tyneside Health Authority estimate legal costs of around £10,000 for each of the six health authorities that have been involved in the joint legal action.

Departmental Staff (Travel)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the mileage rates currently applicable to staff, indicating what changes have been made to encourage staff to switch from cars to public transport and other less polluting forms of travel. [67494]

Ms Jowell: Most staff in the Department are currently reimbursed for business use of their private car at the rate of 40 pence per mile for the first 4,000 miles in a year, and 22.5 pence thereafter.

Staff are encouraged to use public transport where it is cost effective to do so. As part of its strategy to encourage staff to switch to public transport and less polluting forms of travel, the Department has also set up a working group to review the policies and operational arrangements for business travel by departmental staff.

The Department encourages the use of bicycles wherever practicable and makes available an advance of salary of up to £500 for staff to purchase a bicycle and necessary safety equipment.

Beta-Interferon

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the research being commissioned by his Department into the effectiveness of Betaferon (Beta-Interferon-1b) for relapsing-remitting and secondary progressive multiple sclerosis, specifying the length of the research period, its cost and with whom the research is to be placed. [67425]

Mr. Hutton: Experts are still discussing the design of the proposed trial and no decision has therefore been made yet on its feasibility or value.

Dental Services (Gloucestershire)

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much in total out of Gloucestershire Health Authority's Investing in Dentistry bid he expects to allocate; when he expects that total amount to be allocated by; and if he will make a statement. [67490]

Mr. Denham: Only those Gloucestershire Health Authority investing in dentistry bids which have been approved by my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Health will receive funding. Payment of the grants will depend on the individual terms and conditions of each of the awards.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Illegal Fishing

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what measures he has taken and what further measures are planned to address the problem of illegal fishing by Spanish nationals in Gibraltarian waters. [67266]

Ms Quin: In addition to the normal enforcement measures of the Royal Gibraltar Police and Gibraltar Police and Gibraltar Security Police, we have sought to address this problem by encouraging dialogue with fishermen, both at a local level and via the authorities in Madrid. We have also reached an understanding with the Spanish authorities of the situation that had prevailed between 1991 (when the Gibraltar Nature Protection Ordinance was introduced) and 1997 during which Spanish fishermen respected the authority of the Police, and have been seeking to return to that situation.

Chechnya

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) when the British Embassy in Moscow learnt of the Interfax report of 6 December that a rescue attempt was to be made to release the hostages in Chechnya, employed by Granger Telecom; [66958]

(2) when the Foreign Office in London learned of the BBC World Service report from the Caversham Monitoring Service that Interfax had reported that a rescue attempt was to be made to release the hostages in Chechnya employed by Granger Telecom. [66959]

Mr. Tony Lloyd *[pursuant to his reply, 21 January 1999, c. 536]:* An administrative error led to an omission in my answer of 21 January to the hon. Member. The correct answer should read as follows:

On 7 December 1998, both HM Embassy Moscow and FCO officials in London saw the Interfax news agency despatch reporting Chechen assertions that the men were being held outside Chechnya and that Russian law-enforcement agencies might try to rescue the hostages.

EU Common Foreign and Security Policy

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the subjects currently under discussion by common foreign and security policy working groups; and if he will make a statement on the nature of United Kingdom representation in each group. [66150]

Ms Quin: Twenty-eight Common Foreign and Security Policy Working Groups meet on a regular basis. The UK attends all these meetings. The UK delegations are composed of officials with the necessary expertise from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and other Government Departments concerned.

The subjects which the Working Groups cover are:

Administrative Affairs
Africa
Armaments Policy
Asia
Central Europe
Consular Affairs
Conventional Arms Exports
Communications
Drugs
Global Disarmament
Eastern Europe and Central Asia
Euro-Mediterranean
Human Rights
Latin America
Law of the Sea
Mashraq/Maghreb
Middle East Peace Process
Middle East/Gulf
Non-proliferation
OSCE
Policy Planning
Protocol
Public International Law

Security

South East Europe

Terrorism

United Nations

Western Balkans.

Fishing Dispute (Gibraltar)

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to refer the dispute over Spanish vessels fishing in British waters around Gibraltar to the International Court at The Hague. [67350]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* We have no plans to refer this dispute to the International Court of Justice.

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what proposals he has put to the Spanish Government with a view to finding a solution to the current dispute over fishing by Spanish fishing boats in British waters around Gibraltar. [67349]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* We have reached an understanding with the Spanish authorities of the situation that had prevailed between 1991 (when the Gibraltar Nature Protection Ordinance was introduced) and 1997 during which Spanish fishermen respected the authority of the Police. We have been seeking, through continuing dialogue with the Spanish authorities, to return to that situation.

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what British reinforcements have been sent to Gibraltar to enforce the law with regard to fishing in British waters. [67351]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* Primary responsibility for enforcing the laws concerning fishing in British waters around Gibraltar lies with the Royal Gibraltar Police. They have not been reinforced from the United Kingdom.

Coral Reefs

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what investigation he has conducted into the effects of coral bleaching on the reefs of the British Indian Ocean Territory. [65823]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The British Indian Ocean Territory Government have made initial assessment of the extent of coral bleaching in the Territory. They have also agreed to sponsor a further, in-depth study into coral bleaching, which we hope will take place in February.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he is taking to ensure that commercial fishing close to the reefs of the British Indian Ocean Territory is adjusted to ensure the safe-guarding of the reefs. [65824]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The commercial inshore fishery occurs from dories drifting across the banks using only hook and lines, which are not considered harmful. We do not allow other methods such as trawling where nets could become entangled on the reef.

Controls are implemented by limited licensing, based on best available scientific information and adopting a precautionary approach to fisheries management.

Right hon. Member for Hartlepool

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he is employing the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) as an adviser. [67885]

Mr. Robin Cook: No, but I will continue to maintain close contact with all Parliamentary colleagues interested in foreign policy.

Gibraltar

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will seek to amend annexe II of the 1976 legislative measure of the EEC on Direct Elections to extend the franchise to the people of Gibraltar for elections to the European Parliament. [67396]

Ms Quin: We have no plans to seek to amend annexe II of the 1976 EC Act. Amendment would require the agreement of all Member States. In present circumstances there is no prospect of securing this.

Arms Embargoes

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many arms embargoes were in force on 1 December 1997; who they were against; on what date each relevant Order in Council was made; on what date a copy of each Order in Council was sent to the relevant British embassy or high commission; and on what date each order in Council was first read by the relevant British ambassador or high commissioner. [67698]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: At 1 December 1997, the following arms embargoes were in operation:

UN

Iraq

UNSCR 661 adopted on 6 August 1990. (The resolution imposed a general ban on exports, including arms.) The Iraq and Kuwait (United Nations Sanctions) Order 1990 was made on 8 August 1990.

Somalia

UNSCR 733 adopted on 23 January 1992. The United Nations Arms Embargoes (Liberia, Somalia and the Former Yugoslavia) Order was made on 20 July 1993.

Libya

UNSCR 748 adopted on 31 March 1992. The Libya (United Nations Sanctions) Order 1992 was made on 8 April 1992, replaced by the Libya (United Nations Sanctions) Order 1993 made on 16 November 1993.

Liberia

UNSCR 788 adopted on 19 November 1992. The United Nations Arms Embargoes (Liberia, Somalia and the Former Yugoslavia) Order was made on 20 July 1993.

Angola

UNSCR 864 adopted on 15 September 1993. The Angola (United Nations Sanctions) Order 1993 was made on 29 September 1993.

Rwanda (and neighbouring States if for use in Rwanda)

UNSCR 1011 adopted on 16 August 1995, replacing UNSCR 918 adopted on 17 May 1994. The United Nations Arms Embargoes (Amendment) (Rwanda) Order was made on 22 June 1994 and the United Nations Arms Embargoes (Rwanda) (Amendment) Order was made on 12 February 1997.

Sierra Leone

UNSCR 1132 adopted on 8 October 1997. The Sierra Leone (United Nations Sanctions) Order was made on 30 October 1997.

EU

Afghanistan

adopted on 17 December 1996

Bosnia and Herzegovina

adopted 26 February 1996 but entered into force 13 March 1996 (maintaining earlier ban on Former Yugoslavia)

Burma

declared 29 July 1991

China

declared 27 June 1989

Croatia

adopted 26 February 1996 but entered into force 13 March 1996 (maintaining earlier ban on Former Yugoslavia)

Nigeria

adopted 20 November 1995

Sudan

adopted 15 March 1994

OSCE

Armenia

agreed 28 February 1992

Azerbaijan

agreed 28 February 1992.

In addition, the UK restricted the export of arms to the following countries:

Argentina

with effect from 3 April 1982

Iran

with effect from 1 March 1993.

Orders in Council are made in respect of arms embargoes imposed by the United Nations Security Council. (Other embargoes are implemented under the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994.) Until recently, it was the practice to circulate copies of the relevant resolutions, rather than copies of the Orders in Council, or summaries of them, to the relevant High Commissions or Embassies. Since July 1998 all FCO Departments and Posts overseas and all Whitehall Departments have been sent details of the scope and provisions of all new sanctions, including arms embargoes.

Arms Exports

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 1 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *122–23*, when he will publish a report on UK strategic exports; and if he will make a statement. [67893]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We will publish the report as soon as possible.

Anglo-German Working Group

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the names of the persons appointed to represent Her Majesty's Government on the Anglo-German Working Group; and what are its terms of reference and the persons or bodies to whom it reports. [65746]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* I have been asked to reply.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and Chancellor Schroeder have authorised informal bilateral contacts. They are led on the British side by Lord Falconer on behalf of the Government. The exchanges also cover party political matters, which are handled on behalf of the Labour Party by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson).

CABINET OFFICE

Departmental Staff (Travel)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will list the mileage rates currently applicable to staff, indicating what changes have been made to encourage staff to switch from cars to public transport and other less polluting forms of travel. [67495]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The mileage rates currently applicable to staff are:

	Private car rate	
Miles travelled in a financial year	*Up to 1500cc*	*Over 1500cc*
Up to 4,000 miles	34p	43p
Over 4,000 miles	19p	23p

The Cabinet Office, along with its Agencies, is in the process of developing a new environmental policy and green action plan in line with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' guidance. An integral part of this development is consideration of how best to develop a Green Transport Plan for the Department. It is also an issue which is already being addressed as part of the development of the Department's new headquarters building.

TREASURY

Child Benefit

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate *(a)* the number of married couples entitled to child benefit whose combined taxable income exceeds the higher rate threshold where neither spouse pays higher rate tax and *(b)* the number of married couples entitled to child benefit whose combined taxable incomes are (i) less than £35,000, (ii) £40,000, (iii) £50,000 and (iv) less than twice the higher rate threshold, where one of the spouses is a higher rate taxpayer. [64672]

Dawn Primarolo: The number of married couples entitled to child benefit whose combined taxable income exceeds the higher rate threshold for a single person and where neither spouse pays tax at the higher rate is estimated to be about 850,000 for 1998–99.

Estimates for 1998–99 for the number of married couples entitled to child benefit and where one of the spouses is a higher rate taxpayer are given in the table.

Combined taxable income	*Number of married couples*
Less than £35,000	80,000
Less than £40,000	200,000
Less than £50,000	450,000
Less than £62,590[1]	675,000

[1] twice the higher rate threshold for a single person.

Concordats

Mr. Curry: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will publish the concordats for regulating competition between *(a)* the regional development agencies in England and *(b)* the RDAs and equivalent bodies for Scotland and Wales. [66184]

Mrs. Roche: The Government will shortly publish a concordat on financial assistance to industry.

Commercial Lobbyists

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what rules or guidance his Department has to govern the *(a)* formal and *(b)* informal interaction between his civil servants and commercial lobbyists. [66214]

Ms Hewitt: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by the Prime Minister to my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) on 27 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *4*.

EMU

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the reasons for which Sweden was excluded from early entry into Phase Three of Economic and Monetary Union. [66387]

Ms Hewitt: The Council Decision of 3 May 1998, in accordance with Article 109j(4) of the EC Treaty, stated that Sweden did not fulfil the necessary conditions for adoption of the single currency. Unlike the currencies of Italy and Finland, neither of which were within the ERM for two years, the Swedish Crown exhibited insufficient exchange rate stability during the two year review period. In addition, national legislation in Sweden, including the statute of the Swedish national central bank, was not compatible with the requirements of Articles 107 and 108 of the Treaty and the Statute of the ESCB.

EU Code of Conduct Group

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the taxes discussed by the EU Code of Conduct Group to date. [66345]

Dawn Primarolo: The EU Code of Conduct Group deals with business taxation and is therefore principally concerned with corporation tax and equivalent taxes in other Member States.

Tax Competition

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will provide the Government's definition of harmful tax competition. [66340]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) on 17 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *752*.

Offshore Trusts

Mr. Brady: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the Government's policy on offshore trusts, with particular reference to trusts which will be exempt from new legislation. [66447]

Dawn Primarolo: It is our policy to ensure that the UK tax liability of those who set up, or benefit from, offshore trusts, reflects the benefits which they, or their immediate family, may receive from the trust. In the last Finance Act we introduced a comprehensive and effective regime for taxing gains realised within offshore trusts. This is a difficult and complex area of the law, which we keep under continual review to ensure that the system operates as we intend.

Asbestos Exposure

Mr. Cox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the number of registered deaths in the United Kingdom within the last 12 months where the cause of death was due to exposure to asbestos; and if he will make a statement. [66650]

Ms Hewitt: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Tom Cox, dated 26 January 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question on the number of registered deaths in the United Kingdom within the last 12 months where the cause of death was due to exposure to asbestos.

In 1997, the latest year for which figures are available, there were 1,597 deaths in the United Kingdom that were certified with asbestos or asbestos related diseases as a main or contributory cause of death.

Pesticide Tax

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when a decision concerning the imposition of a pesticide tax will be made. [66589]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* As was made clear in the Pre-Budget Report, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions has commissioned research into whether a tax or charge on pesticides would be an effective way to reduce pollution. The Government are currently reviewing the findings of that research project, and will evaluate the results of other ongoing work in considering how best to proceed.

Duty-free Sales

Mr. Ivan Henderson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress has been made on retaining duty free sales in the EU. [64597]

Dr. Stoate: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress has been made on retaining duty free sales in Europe. [64620]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* At the Vienna European Council meeting on 11 December 1998 the UK argued that there was a good case for looking once more at the decision to end duty-free sales in the EU. Heads of Government agreed that the Commission and ECOFIN should examine, by March 1999, the problems which could arise with regard to employment and to address, on the basis of proposals from the Commission, possible means of tackling these problems, including the possibility of a limited extension of duty-free sales.

The UK is now actively pursuing these issues with the Commission and other member states in order to find an acceptable solution, which has unanimous agreement.

Capital Assets (Devaluation)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will assess the extent of the devaluation of capital assets worldwide as a result of the financial crisis in East Asia and South America; and what its principal effects have been on Her Majesty's Government policy. [66727]

Ms Hewitt: Despite recent gains in some East Asian and Latin American markets, stock values and currencies in these regions are still well below their levels of 18 months ago. But it is difficult to assess the direct effect of these price movements on global capital assets.

Because financial turbulence in Asia and the Americas has negative consequences for the inhabitants of those regions and poses a threat to global economic stability, the UK has taken a lead in finding solutions to the present turmoil. The G7 Declaration of 30 October 1998, which the UK brokered as G7 Chair, contained commitments to fight financial market contagion through an enhanced IMF facility; increase the transparency of the international financial system; enhance global financial regulation, in particular through better co-ordination between international financial institutions, national regulators and international regulatory bodies; and improve financial crisis prevention and resolution mechanisms, including the involvement of private sector creditors. G7 Finance ministers and Central Bank governors have also committed themselves to

> "create or sustain the conditions for strong, domestic demand-led growth and financial stability",

reflected in the interest rate cuts in G7 countries in recent months.

Fixed Investments

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the excess of capital moneys over presently remunerative fixed investment opportunities worldwide; and if he will make a statement. [66726]

Ms Hewitt: International investment flows can bring huge benefits to all countries. But they also entail risks, as the events of the last 18 months have shown, when investors are insufficiently informed and educated and when institutions lack credibility.

The G7 declaration of 30 October 1998 set out a blueprint for the reform of the international financial architecture which will make a major difference in this regard. Increased transparency and openness in the public and private sector will provide better information on which the private sector can base its risk assessment and investment decisions. Better methods of involving the private sector in crisis resolution and prevention will also sharpen private sector risk-management and reduce moral hazard.

In addition, the G7 declaration pledges to bring together the key international institutions and key national authorities involved in financial sector stability better to co-operate and to co-ordinate their activities in the management and development of policies to foster stability and reduce systemic risk in the international financial system and to exchange information more systematically on these risks.

The Government believe that the opening of capital markets in emerging economies must be carried out in a careful and well-sequenced manner if countries are to benefit from closer integration into the global economy.

ECOFIN Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the outcome of the ECOFIN Council held in Brussels on 18 January; and if he will make a statement. [66819]

Ms Hewitt: The Chancellor attended the Economic and Finance Council—ECOFIN—of the European Union in Brussels on 20 January 1999.

The German Presidency and the Commission presented their work programmes in public session. All Member States were able to present their views on the programme. The emphasis on tackling unemployment was particularly welcomed. ECOFIN adopted a Report on information requirements in Economic and Monetary Union.

The Chairman of the Economic and Financial Committee presented Opinions on the Irish and Austrian Stability programmes. The Commission and several Member State gave their views on the Opinions. Both opinions, with minor amendments, were adopted by the Council. There was a brief discussion of Agenda 2000.

Beer Duty

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has for harmonising beer duty in the United Kingdom with that of other European Union countries. [66970]

Dawn Primarolo: Member states are free to set excise duty rates at the level they feel are appropriate to their own particular circumstances, subject only to the agreed minimum rates. This was the basis of the agreement reached by all member states in ECOFIN in 1992 and achieved harmonisation to the extent necessary for completion of the Single Market. Nevertheless, the UK continues to argue for a levelling up of most minimum rates but recognises that progress is likely only in the long term.

VAT Returns (Euros)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer for what reasons Customs and Excise is unable to accept VAT returns in euros; and if he will make a statement. [66983]

Ms Hewitt: Customs and Excise are unable to accept VAT returns in euros because to do so would present a real risk of serious revenue losses.

The tax is accounted for in respect of monthly or quarterly periods but there is a period of one month in either case for a VAT return to be submitted. Exchange rates may move during this period, giving the business an opportunity to time the sending of the return to maximise the benefit of any fluctuation.

Taxes (Final Reminders)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what action he is taking to ensure that the Inland Revenue does not issue final reminders from more than one tax office, in cases involving pensioners who receive pensions from more than one source. [66982]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue provides taxpayers with a unique taxpayer reference in the SA system from which the issue of final reminders and other forms is controlled. This unique reference should ensure that even where a taxpayer has more than one source of income and deals with more than one tax office, final reminders are generated only once.

HIPC Initiative

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress has been made towards the goal set out in the G8's Birmingham Communiqué of all the heavily indebted poor countries being admitted to the HIPC initiative by the year 2000. [66742]

Ms Hewitt: Sixteen out of the 20 countries originally identified by the World Bank/IMF as eligible for HIPC debt relief have embarked on the process: Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Guinea Bissau, Guyana, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Niger, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. Four have not: Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar and Sao Tome and Principe.

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent amendments to the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative have been made to give further support to post-conflict and post-catastrophe countries. [67037]

Ms Hewitt: At the Annual Meetings of the IMF and World Bank in October, the decision was made to allow IMF post conflict assistance programmes to count towards a country's track record under the HIPC initiative. This could bring decision point (and therefore debt relief) forward by up to 12 months for certain countries, including Rwanda.

Following Hurricane Mitch, the Chancellor secured several measures to help mitigate the debt services burdens of post-catastrophe countries, including the establishment of an IMF/World Bank Trust Fund. The UK contributed £10 million to this. In December the UK participated in a Paris Club agreement which granted a three year moratorium on debt service payments from Honduras and Nicaragua.

Winter Mortality Rates

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Knowsley, South (Mr. O'Hara) of 8 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *140*, regarding deaths from hypothermia, if he will provide the information by (i) region and (ii) parliamentary constituency. [67296]

Ms Hewitt: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply. The tables referred to in the letter are in the Library.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mrs. Linda Gilroy, dated 26 January 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question on the number of deaths from hypothermia by (i) region and (ii) parliamentary constituency in England and Wales in 1997.

The information requested is shown in the attached table.

Smuggling

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the quantity of beer smuggled into the United Kingdom for resale in the last year. [67229]

Dawn Primarolo: HM Customs and Excise estimate the volume of beer smuggled cross-Channel into the United Kingdom for resale in 1998 to be 2.6 million hectolitres.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many prosecutions for smuggling *(a)* alcohol and *(b)* tobacco there have been in each quarter since January 1993. [67230]

Dawn Primarolo: The information requested is not available in this form. Specific figures are available for the number of prosecutions generated by Excise Verification Officers for smuggling of alcohol and/or tobacco from within the European Union:

Year	*Number*
1993–94	44
1994–95	515
1995–96	438
1996–97	502
1997–98	417
1998–99 (April-December)	408

Exports

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the level of business confidence in relation to UK exports; and if he will make a statement. [67630]

Ms Hewitt: The Government welcome the improvement in exporters' sentiment revealed in recent surveys from the Confederation of British Industry and the British Chambers of Commerce.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Maples: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how he travelled from the Commonwealth Finance Ministers meeting in Mauritius in September 1997 to Bangkok for the ASEM meeting; who accompanied him; what was the cost; and what use he made of chartered helicopters for travel in and around Bangkok during the time he was there for the ASEM meeting. [67784]

Mr. Gordon Brown: All arrangements for this journey fully complied with the provisions of the Ministerial Code and Cabinet Office guidance on travel by Ministers.

Personal Investment Authority

Mr. Collins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proposals he has to introduce an independent appeals element into the decisions of the Personal Investment Authority; and if he will make a statement. [67646]

Ms Hewitt: As a self-regulating organisation, the Personal Investment Authority must have fair and reasonable rules for admission, expulsion and discipline over its member firms, with scope for appeals. The adequacy of these arrangements is a matter for the Financial Services Authority.

Construction Industry

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he plans to take in respect of sole traders, partnerships and small companies in the construction industry who do not qualify for tax certificates as regards their position under the new deduction regulations; and if he will make a statement. [66980]

Dawn Primarolo: We shall be introducing legislation in the next Finance Bill to amend the rules of the new construction industry scheme which is due to take effect from 1 August 1999. That will make it easier for many small and medium businesses to obtain gross payment certificates. Those who do not qualify for certificates will be paid with deductions made on account of tax and national insurance contributions (NICs), but they will not ultimately be liable for any more tax and NICs than if they held certificates. The Inland Revenue has consulted widely with construction industry representative bodies on the design of the new scheme and has published guidance and set up telephone helplines for contractors and subcontractors.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Food Standards Agency

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he anticipates that the Food Standards Agency will be in operation. [66554]

Mr. Rooker: The date when the Food Standards Agency is established will depend on how soon the necessary legislation can be approved by Parliament. We hope to introduce a Bill later this Session if sufficient extra time is available.

CAP Reform

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will pursue with the European Commission proposals to reform the CAP by *(a)* abolishing the tobacco subsidy in Europe and *(b)* assisting pig farmers. [66895]

Mr. Rooker: The European Commission is fully aware that the Government disapprove of the EU tobacco regime. The Commission is to report on the functioning of the common market organisation for raw tobacco before 1 April 2002, and we will continue to put forward our views.

I am keeping closely in touch with the Commission on the current pig situation. However, I consider that it is better to use existing market instruments rather than attempting a reform of the regime.

Tobacco (EU Subsidies)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received on withdrawing the subsidy to tobacco producers in the European Union. [66903]

Mr. Rooker: This Ministry receives occasional correspondence about the EU tobacco regime. Last year, a number of letters from the public were received early in the year at the time of the proposals for reform of the regime.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Home Energy Efficiency Scheme

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress his Department made in encouraging installers of the Home Energy Efficiency scheme to take on young trainees as part of the Government's Welfare-to-Work programme. [66660]

Mr. Andrew Smith: All employers are encouraged to take on young people under the New Deal and we have made strong progress in engaging employers nationally and locally. We also recognise the importance of the four New Deal options. Under the Environment Task Force option, two of the key environmental objectives to improve the physical condition and energy efficiency of buildings and to conserve energy through the promotion of energy efficient schemes.

Travel-to-interview Costs

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what discretion the Employment Service has to help with travel costs for interviews for people who have been unemployed for less than 13 weeks. [66822]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Employment Service Business Managers have the discretion to ignore short breaks in the 13 week unemployed qualifying period for access to the Travel to Interview Scheme (TIS). The Employment Service may also offer immediate access to the Scheme for victims of designated large redundancies.

Higher Education (Complaints Procedures)

Mr. Lepper: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what action is being taken to ensure that universities and other institutions of higher education have in place an internal complaints procedure available to *(a)* undergraduates and *(b)* postgraduates; [67205]

(2) if he will list those universities and other institutions of higher education which do not currently have in place a formal internal complaints procedure available to *(a)* undergraduate and *(b)* postgraduate students; and what timetable has been set for the introduction of such complaints procedures in each case. [67207]

Mr. Mudie: In our response to the Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (the Dearing Committee) we accepted the Committee's recommendation that, over the two years up to July 1999, institutions should review and, if necessary, amend their arrangements for handling complaints from students. We have encouraged them to take the necessary action in the light of guidance issued by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals on an independent review of student appeals and complaints, published in April 1998. The Department does not currently keep records of whether or not an institution has a student complaints procedure but we shall be reviewing this summer the progress made in following up the Dearing Committee's recommendation.

Mr. Lepper: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance is given by *(a)* the Quality Assurance Agency and *(b)* other bodies to universities and other institutions of higher education in relation to (i) the systems to be used in their internal complaints procedures and (ii) the ways in which complaints procedures should be publicised. [67206]

Mr. Mudie: We are not aware of any guidance issued by the Quality Assurance Agency. The Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals published guidance on an independent review of student appeals and complaints on 23 April 1998. The guidance does not advocate uniform machinery for the higher education sector. Rather, it identifies six options for meeting the principle of independent review.

Physical Education

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the time actually spent by pupils on PE at Key Stages 1 and 2. [67737]

Mr. Charles Clarke: There is no prescribed statutory minimum or maximum time which schools should devote to PE. The National Curriculum for PE consists of six areas of activity and schools have a degree of freedom in deciding which physical activities to teach and how much time should be allocated to them and to other National Curriculum subjects. PE must be taught to all children throughout their compulsory schooling.

Evidence from OFSTED inspections of the number of hours per week primary and secondary schools currently spend teaching PE as follows.

	Average hours of PE per week (approx.)
Key Stage 1 (ages 5–7)	1 hour 20 minutes
Key Stage 2 (ages 7–11)	1 hour 35 minutes

These figures do not account for travelling and changing time incurred in the provision of swimming tuition.

Tuition Fees (Liability Assessment)

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many students had not had their liability for tuition fees assessed by their local authority on 31 December 1998. [67409]

Mr. Mudie *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* This information is not collected centrally.

School Leavers

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list for each careers services area the percentage of young people leaving school at age 16 with *(a)* no qualifications and *(b)* few qualifications as defined by his Department, in rank order. [67252]

Mr. Mudie *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* GCSE/GNVQ achievements of all 16 year old pupils in maintained schools by careers service areas are shown in the table:

GCSE/GNVQ achievements of 16 year old pupils[1] in maintained schools in England, 1997–98

Careers service areas	*(a) Percentage of 16 year olds achieving no qualifications*	*Rank*	*(b) Percentage of 16 year olds achieving at least 1 grade G but fewer than 5 grades A*-C*	*Rank*
Avon	6.2	40	50.9	37
Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham	9.6	63	56.6	61
Bedford and Luton	4.4	9	53.1	47
Berkshire and Oxfordshire	5.1	22	46.1	11
Birmingham	8.1	53	56.4	60
Black Country	7.7	48	56.9	62
Bolton, Bury and Rochdale	6.5	42	52.6	44
Bradford	11.0	66	59.6	63
Buckinghamshire	5.3	27	43.3	5
Calderdale and Kirklees	7.7	49	52.9	45

GCSE/GNVQ achievements of 16 year old pupils[1] in maintained schools in England, 1997–98

Careers service areas	*(a) Percentage of 16 year olds achieving no qualifications*	*Rank*	*(b) Percentage of 16 year olds achieving at least 1 grade G but fewer than 5 grades A*-C*	*Rank*
Cambridgeshire	5.4	29	46.1	12
Cleveland	9.2	61	55.4	54
Cornwall and Devon (including Isles of Scilly)	3.8	5	48.6	27
Coventry	8.6	58	55.5	56
Crewe, Congleton, Halton, Macclesfield, Nantwich, Vale Royale, Warrington	4.0	6	46.6	17
Cumbria	5.8	32	50.4	34
Derbyshire	5.1	24	51.4	39
Dorset	4.5	11	45.0	7
Durham	8.0	52	56.2	58
East Lancashire	6.0	38	52.3	42
East Sussex	6.1	39	48.5	25
Essex	5.4	28	47.5	21
Gloucestershire	3.8	4	41.9	4
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	4.8	15	48.1	24
Hereford and Worcester	6.6	43	47.6	22
Hertfordshire	4.4	10	41.6	3
Humberside	8.2	54	55.4	55
Kent	5.0	17	47.3	20
Leeds	9.9	64	52.5	43
Leicestershire and Rutland	6.6	44	51.4	38
Lincolnshire	5.6	31	46.3	14
Liverpool, Knowsley, Sefton	10.6	65	55.6	57
London Area 1, Brent and Harrow	5.0	19	46.6	16
London Area 2, Barnet, Enfield, Haringey	6.4	41	49.7	32
London Area 3, City of London, Hackney, Islington	8.5	57	66.8	66
London Area 4, Barking, Havering, Newham, Redbridge, Tower Hamlet, Waltham Forest	4.7	14	55.4	53
London Area 5, Greenwich, Lambeth, Lewisham, Southwark	7.2	46	61.9	64
London Area 6, Bexley, Bromley, Croydon, Sutton	4.5	12	46.4	15
London Area 7, Kingston, Merton, Wandsworth	7.3	47	50.5	35
London Area 8, Ealing, Hillingdon, Hounslow, Richmond	5.3	26	48.8	29
London Area 9, Camden, City of Westminster, Hammersmith and Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea,	8.3	56	49.8	33
Manchester, Salford, Tameside, Trafford	8.3	55	54.3	52
Norfolk	5.5	30	48.6	28
North Yorkshire	4.1	7	41.3	1
Northamptonshire	4.9	16	50.8	36
Northumberland	6.0	37	49.6	31
Nottinghamshire	8.0	51	53.7	49
Oldham	9.3	62	54.0	51
Sheffield	9.2	60	53.0	46
Shropshire	3.8	3	46.8	18
Solihull	4.1	8	46.2	13
Somerset	3.3	1	45.8	10
St. Helens	7.2	45	53.3	48
Staffordshire	5.8	35	52.1	41
Stockport and High Peak	5.0	18	45.1	8
Suffolk	3.8	2	47.7	23
Sunderland	5.9	36	62.1	65
Surrey	5.1	23	41.4	2
Tyneside	9.0	59	53.9	50
Wakefield	5.8	33	56.4	59
Warwickshire	5.2	25	49.1	30
West Lancashire	5.0	20	48.6	26
West Sussex	4.7	13	43.6	6
Wigan	5.8	34	51.4	40
Wiltshire	5.1	21	45.8	9
Wirral, Ellesmere Port, Neston, City of Chester	7.9	50	47.1	19

[1] Age 16 at the end of the academic year i.e. 31 August 1998.

National Curriculum

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the importance of design, engineering, manufacturing and technology in the curriculum. [67783]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Engineering and manufacturing are not subjects of the National Curriculum, but related issues are commonly covered by National Curriculum design and technology (D&T) and information technology (IT). D&T and IT have occupied a justifiably important position in the National Curriculum since its inception in

1990. We are reviewing the National Curriculum for the year 2000 and are considering a range of issues. In reaching decisions on the future shape of the National Curriculum, we will listen to the views of a wide range of people. There will be a public consultation on the revised National Curriculum in the summer.

Toddington and Didbrook Primary Schools

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received from *(a)* Gloucestershire County Council and *(b)* other interested parties, on the proposal to amalgamate Toddington Primary School with Didbrook Primary School; what discussions with interested parties he intends to have before coming to his decision on the proposal; and when he expects to reach a decision. [67155]

Ms Estelle Morris: On 16 October, Gloucestershire Local Education Authority published statutory proposals to close Didbrook and Toddington County Primary Schools, and to establish a new school on the Didbrook site. We have received a number of representations. The local education authority has also received objections to the proposals, which they have passed on to the Department. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will give careful consideration to the proposals, to the objections to the proposals and to the local education authority's comments on the objections; and to any other comments he receives. He will reach a decision as soon as possible, consistent with full consideration of all the relevant issues.

Design and Technology

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how design and technology scores at secondary level compared with other subjects at *(a)* Key Stage 3 and *(b)* Key Stage 4 in Ofsted reports on progress and on teaching quality. [67782]

Ms Estelle Morris: Ofsted reports covering 1995–96 show that 58 per cent. of schools had good standards of achievement for design and technology (D&T) at Key Stage 3. More pupils reach this standard in English, art and physical education than in D&T, but fewer do so in other subjects. At Key Stage 4, 57 per cent. of schools had good standards of achievement for D&T. This is better than pupils' performances in mathematics, science, information technology and modern foreign languages but poorer than other subjects. We expect that the improvement at Key Stage 3 will gradually feed into Key Stage 4.

Departmental Papers (Access to Visually Impaired)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has for departmental *(a)* White and *(b)* Green Papers to be made available on floppy disk format in a form which facilitates access for the visually impaired. [67838]

Mr. Mudie: As the Department responsible for disability issues, we aim to make our most important documents available to the widest possible audiences including the visually impaired.

Summaries of recent Green and White Papers have been made available free in Braille and on audio cassette. The texts are also available on the Department's website, which many people with less severe visual impairments find very convenient, since they can adjust their own browser software to as large a type size as they require.

It has not been our usual practice to offer texts on floppy disk simply because there has not been significant demand. Availability of texts via the internet may now be satisfying that demand but, if we receive an ad hoc request for a text on disk, we are happy to produce and supply it.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Pensions

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the capital sum which would be required, at current annuity rates, to buy a pension which would give a person retiring at the age of 65 years the same income after housing costs as someone entitled to income support, assuming an average level of housing costs and taking into account the cash value of the principal benefits in kind available to pensioner recipients of income support but not to other pensioners. [65423]

Mr. Timms: The information is not available in the form requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

Using a single life annuity rate, a capital sum of approximately £50,000 would be required to purchase an annuity paying £70.45 per week (the current level of Income Support applicable to a single 65 year old with no dependants or disability), indexed annually to the Retail Prices Index, for a person aged 65. A charge of 2 per cent. of the fund has been assumed to be deducted.

Notes:

1. Estimate is rounded to the nearest £5,000.

2. No adjustment has been made to the basic Income Support entitlement for a person aged 65. Pensioners on this level of income would qualify for assistance with most housing costs and for the principal benefits in kind, even though not actually in receipt of Income Support.

3. The annuity rate used is derived from the tables issued by the Government Actuary for determining the maximum annual income withdrawal from post-1997 protected rights held in an appropriate personal pension, based on the yield on UK gilts (High Coupon; 15 years) on 15 January 1999. These tables assume an annuity with Limited Price Indexation, ie an annual increase in line with the Retail Prices Index or 5 per cent., whichever is lower. Under current conditions, this gives a reasonable approximation to the cost of an annuity with full RPI linking.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to paragraph 17, on page 14 of "Partnership in Pensions", Cm 4179, what estimate he has made of the number of those reaching retirement age who, by 2025, will have to rely on means-tested benefits under his proposals. [65579]

Mr. Timms: The Green Paper proposals are designed to ensure that someone with a full working life, or years covered by credits, will receive a pension on retirement above the Minimum Income Guarantee. The full impact of the proposals will be felt when people have experienced a full working lifetime in the new scheme.

The estimate referred to in the Green Paper was made using the Department's PENSIM model which can give only a broad indication of the impact so far into the future. Due to the degree of uncertainty surrounding estimates,

PENSIM cannot identify relatively small changes. The impact of pension policy tends to build up slowly over time and in 2025, after only 20 years of the new system, will be relatively small.

However, estimates suggest that approximately 1.5 million pensioners (around 20 per cent.) will receive payments from the Minimum Income Guarantee when it is introduced in April 1999. On the basis of unchanged policies (ie. not taking into account the effects of our other proposals in the Green Paper) approximately 3.5 million pensioners (1 in 3) in 2050 could rely on the Minimum Income Guarantee. Even if no behavioural changes are assumed, the new insurance contract for pensions will mean that these estimates are reduced to approximately 2.5 million pensioners (1 in 4) receiving income from the Minimum Income Guarantee in 2050, and a lower proportion in years after 2050.

As an illustration of the possible impact of the behavioural effects of the proposals in "Partnership in Pensions", if all those in work saved an additional 5 per cent., the figure would fall to approximately 2 million in 2050.

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the numbers of pensioners who would be entitled to *(a)* existing income support and *(b)* the future minimum pension guarantee if (i) a pension disregard of (1) £10 per week and (2) £20 per week were introduced and (ii) if the disregard were confined to pension income paid to widows and widowers. [66460]

Mr. Timms: The tables show the number of pensioners who would be newly entitled to benefit under the proposed disregards.

Estimated number of pensioners who would float onto benefit

	Existing Income Support gainers in 1998–99	*Future Minimum Income Guarantee gainers in 1999–2000*
£10 occupational pension disregard	30,000	35,000
£20 occupational pension disregard	75,000	80,000

Estimated number of widowed pensioners who would float onto benefit

	Existing Income Support gainers in 1998–99	*Future Minimum Income Guarantee gainers in 1999–2000*
£10 occupational pension disregard	20,000	20,000
£20 occupational pension disregard	50,000	55,000

Notes:

1. The data are taken from the 1997 Quarterly Statistical Enquiries and 1995–96 Family Resources Survey, with administrative data adjustments. Figures are uprated to 1998–99 for Income Support and 1999–2000 for the Minimum Income Guarantee.
2. Estimates are rounded to the nearest 5,000.
3. The figures given are of pensioner benefit units (the individual pensioner or at least one of the couple is of state pension age or above), rather than individual pensioners.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security in what respects, other than the rate of accrual on annual earnings below £18,000 and the crediting-in of carers and disabled people, the state second pension is planned to differ from SERPS. [67887]

Mr. Timms: Compared with SERPS, the new State Second Pension will improve the entitlements of lower paid employees, give extra help to moderate earners and for the first time provide credits to carers and the long-term disabled with broken work records.

Ultimately, we expect the State Second Pension to become a flat rate scheme for those on lower earnings, with moderate and high earners joining a funded pension.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will publish *(a)* the information in Chart 5 of "A New Contract for Welfare: Partnership in Pensions", for persons with annual earnings of (i) £3,000, (ii) £6,000, (iii) £9,000, (iv) £12,000, (v) £15,000, (vi) £18,000, (vii) £21,000 and (viii) £24,000 and *(b)* the income support rates for pensioners in 2050, in earnings-equivalent terms, if they rise in line with earnings between 1999 and 2050. [67886]

Mr. Timms: Information is not available in the form requested. Such information as is available is shown in the table.

Estimated state pension received

£

Earnings a(£s per year)	*Current system*			*Proposed system*		
	Basic state pension	*SERPS*	*Total*	*Basic state pension*	*State second pension*	*Total*
£3,000	29	2	31	29	43	72
£6,000	31	14	44	31	50	80
£9,000	31	25	55	31	50	80
£12,000	31	36	67	31	56	86
£15,000	31	46	76	31	61	91
£18,000	31	53	83	31	64	94
£21,000	31	57	87	31	67	97
£24,000	31	59	89	31	68	98

Notes:

1. Assumes a full working life of 49 years from April 2002. Figures shown in constant 1998 earnings, and rounded to the nearest £1—totals may not sum due to rounding. The State Second Pension Scheme as described on page 45 of "A New Contract for Welfare; Partnership in Pensions", with the exception of the upper earnings band, which is assumed to be £20,000 (in 1998 earnings).
2. Although someone earning £3,000 is below the current LEL, their earnings would eventually exceed the LEL, as the £3,000 is assumed to grow in real terms by 1.5 per cent. per year, and the LEL stays constant.

(b) If the rates for the Minimum Income Guarantee were to increase broadly in line with the growth in average earnings between 1999 and 2050, they would be £75 in April 2050 for a single pensioner and £117 for a pensioner couple in constant 1999 earnings terms.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the statement on page 14 of "A New Contract for Welfare: Partnership in Pensions", that by 2025 well over half those reaching retirement age could have to rely on income-related benefits refers to income support or to all income-related benefits; and what would be the corresponding proportion if the link between the basic pension and average earnings were restored, assuming that income support rose in line with *(a)* prices and *(b)* earnings. [67889]

Mr. Timms: The statement on page 14 of "A New Contract for Welfare: Partnership in Pensions" refers to the estimated number of recently retired pensioners in 2025 who might expect to rely on any income related benefit at some point during their retirement.

Assuming that the maximum rate of basic State pension were increased from the current level in line with average earnings growth from April 1999, *(b)* less than half of recently retired pensioners in 2025 might expect to rely on an income related benefit if income related benefits are uprated in line with average earnings growth, and *(a)* less than 1 in 10 if income related benefits are assumed to be uprated in line with prices. On current policies, less than a quarter of recently retired pensioners in 2025 might rely on an income related benefit during their retirement if income related benefits were uprated in line with prices.

These estimates have been made using the PENSIM model. Due to the number of assumptions used in PENSIM, and the uncertainty surrounding estimates so far in to the future, estimates should be considered as broad brush, and as showing the likely order of magnitude of estimated figures.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what rate of real increase in average earnings is assumed in the illustrative pension forecasts on pages 89 and 104–105 of "A New Contract for Welfare: Partnership in Pensions"; and if he will provide comparable figures based on a real annual increase of 2 per cent. [67888]

Mr. Timms: The pension forecast shown on page 89 of "A New Contract for Welfare: Partnership in Pensions" is illustrative, and based on an individual who has already completed most of their working life. No assumptions have been made concerning the future growth in real average earnings for this illustration.

The hypothetical examples on pages 104–105 are based on real growth in average earnings (and individual earnings in each example) of 1.5 per cent. per year. The effects of assuming 2 per cent. real growth in average earnings (and in individual earnings in each example) are given in the tables.

Example 1: Mechanic

Current system (per week)	*New system (per week)*
State Pensions: £43 Private Pensions: nil	State Pensions: £76 Private Pensions: nil
Total: £43	Total: £76

Example 2: Office Manager

Current system (per week)	*New system (per week)*
State Pensions: £25 Private Pensions: £62	State Pensions: £35 Private Pensions: £71
Total: £87	Total: £106

Example 3: Laboratory Assistant

Current system (per week)	*New system (per week)*
State Pensions: £25 Private Pensions: £107	State Pensions: £25 Private Pensions: £149
Total: £133	Total: £149

Notes:
1. Figures shown in constant 1998 earnings, and rounded to the nearest £1—totals may not sum due to rounding.
2. The State Second Pension Scheme is as described on page 45 of "A New Contract for Welfare: Partnership in Pensions". Full details of the life histories assumed are on pages 104–105.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assumptions are made in "A New Contract for Welfare: Partnership in Pensions", regarding the uprating of the lower and upper earnings limits for national insurance contributions between 1999 and 2050; and what the limits are expected to be in 2050, in terms of 1999 earnings. [67891]

Mr. Timms: The 1998–99 lower earnings limit of £64 a week and upper earnings limit of £485 a week were used for the costings in the Green Paper. These limits are increased in line with prices. On this basis and on the assumption that real earnings would grow by 1.5 per cent. a year, in 2050–51 the lower earnings limit would be £31 a week and the upper earnings limit £235 a week in terms of 1999–2000 earnings.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how the £30 billion cost of raising the basic pension in line with earnings, quoted in "A New Contract for Welfare: Partnership in Pensions", was calculated, including the period to which it relates and the assumptions made; and what would be the resulting reduction in the cost of means-tested benefits. [67890]

Mr. Timms: The Government Actuary's Department estimate that by 2030–31 the annual cost of uprating Retirement Pension and other National Insurance benefits paid to people over State Pension Age in line with earnings would be of the order of £33 billion.

This estimate is in 1998–99 benefit rates, assumes a start date of April 1999 and is based on assumed real earnings growth of 1.5 per cent. Full details of the assumptions underlying the estimate will be available in the forthcoming Quinquennial Review which is prepared by the Government Actuary's Department.

Income-Related Benefit offsets might be of the order of £8 billion, assuming earnings uprating of Income Support.

Estimates such as these are subject to broad margins of error because of the long time period under consideration.

Pensioners

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners are currently being underpaid in respect of their SERPS entitlements. [67901]

Mr. Timms: It is estimated that potentially some 172,000 pensioners could be being underpaid in respect of their SERPS.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioner households will receive a winter fuel payment *(a)* this year and *(b)* next year. [67781]

Angela Eagle: Both this winter and next, an estimated 7 million pensioner households will receive Winter Fuel Payments.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate how many pensioners in *(a)* each region, *(b)* Scotland and *(c)* Wales fail to claim the (i) income support, (ii) housing benefit, (iii) council tax benefit and (iv) other benefits to which they are entitled. [67780]

Mr. Timms: The information is not available. Following the discovery of an error in the published take-up statistics, we are working towards publication of revised statistics relating to 1996–97. Publication is likely in the Spring.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many new retirement pension claims were made in each month since 1 April 1998; and how many of those are currently not receiving correct and final payments of retirement pension. [67900]

Mr. Timms: The number of new retirement pension claims made in each month since 1 April 1998 are as follows:

Month	*Number*
April 1998	51,236
May 1998	45,718
June 1998	55,605
July 1998	50,176
August 1998	42,988
September 1998	50,224
October 1998	51,318
November 1998	48,612
December 1998	36,672

Source: Central Data Unit

At 20 January 1999 it is estimated that 180,000 people are potentially not receiving correct and final payments of Retirement Pension.

Local Deprivation Indicators

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security which measures of local deprivation his Department and its agencies use in considering allocation of funds to local projects. [66716]

Angela Eagle: The Department administers a demand-led social security system based on national eligibility criteria. It therefore provides the main national means of alleviating the impact on families and individuals of insufficient personal financial resources.

However, there are a few instances where local criteria are used for the provision of funds. One such example is the annual allocation of the discretionary social fund budget to Benefit Agency District Offices. In this instance, one of the criteria used is individual demand for social fund loans amongst the local population in receipt of income support. This budgeting exercise occurs annually and full details on local budget allocations and how they are set are available in the Library.

In addition, there are a number of discretionary provisions available to those local authorities who administer Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. For example, housing benefit can be increased up to the level of the contractual rent for people who would otherwise experience exceptional hardship under provisions like the local reference rent. Overall financial provision, and its distribution to individual local authorities, is made annually in full consultation with the Local Authority Associations. Authorities can also operate discretionary local schemes to disregard up to the full amount of a War Disablement Pension and War Widow's Pension not already subject to a statutory disregard within the Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit provisions.

Noise-induced Hearing Loss

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what factors underlay his decision not to fund research into *(a)* noise-induced hearing loss and *(b)* hearing loss due to the aging process. [66857]

Mr. Bayley: A War Pension can be awarded only for disablement which is due to service. A pension cannot be awarded for age related hearing loss alone.

There is a long standing and proven mechanism in place under the War Pension Scheme to monitor any published scientific evidence which might affect entitlement to a War Pension. The Department does not, therefore, normally fund medical research in this area.

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will amend the terms of reference of the review of noise-induced hearing loss to allow it to consider the level of compensation given in civilian courts to police officers and others suffering hearing loss from service-related damage. [66858]

Mr. Bayley: No. This would not be appropriate because civil action is based on negligence, the War Pension Scheme is a "no fault" State compensation scheme.

Family Credit

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the annual cost of compensation for families in receipt of family credit for lost income while on parental leave assuming its application to children aged up to eight years and take up of 10 per cent. for men and 50 per cent. for women. [67002]

Angela Eagle: No such cost in respect of Family Credit is anticipated as, subject to passage of the necessary legislation, Working Families Tax Credit, administered by the Inland Revenue, will replace it from 5 October 1999. The Government are committed to implementing the terms of the Parental Leave Directive by 15 December 1999.

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security in how many of the couples with children currently in receipt of family credit *(a)* the man is the main wage-earner and *(b)* the woman is the main wage-earner. [67423]

Angela Eagle: The information is as follows.

Family credit couple recipients	*Number*
Male main wage earner	304,000
Female main wage earner	90,000

Notes:
1. Figures are based on a sample of 5 per cent. of family credit awards and as such are subject to a degree of sampling error.
2. Caseload figures are rounded to the nearest thousand and may not sum to totals.

Source:
1. Family credit 5 per cent. sample of awards August 1998.

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security of the couples with children currently in receipt of family credit paid by direct debit to an account of the claimant's choice, how many of the accounts are in the name of *(a)* the man, *(b)* the woman and *(c)* the man and the woman. [67424]

Angela Eagle: This question can be answered only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many of the lone parents currently in receipt of family credit are *(a)* women and *(b)* men. [67422]

Angela Eagle: All. The most recent figures available are for August 1998, at that time 16,000 lone parent family credit recipients were men and 374,000 were women.

Notes:
1. Figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample of family credit awards and as such are subject to a degree of sampling error.
2. Caseload figures are rounded to the nearest thousand and may not sum to totals.

Source:
Family credit 5 per cent. sample of awards.

Child Support

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what evaluation he has made of the responses to his Department's consultation on changes to the system of child support; and what reforms he proposes to make as a result and when. [67036]

Angela Eagle: We are currently considering the responses to the Green Paper "Children First: a new approach to child support" and will bring forward our final proposals for reform in due course.

Multiple Sclerosis

Audrey Wise: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people with multiple sclerosis are claiming *(a)* the long-term rate of incapacity benefit and *(b)* severe disablement allowance. [67761]

Mr. Bayley: At 31 August 1998 19,720 people with a main diagnosis of multiple sclerosis were receiving the long-term rate of Incapacity Benefit, and 9,780 were receiving Severe Disablement Allowance.

Source:
DSS—5 per cent. computer sample, excludes a small number of cases not on the system.

Widows' Pensions and Incapacity Benefit

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many new *(a)* widows' pensions and *(b)* incapacity benefit claims were made in each month since 1 April 1998. [67899]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the tables.

Widows' Benefits claims since April 1998

Month	*Claims*
April 1998	2,917
May 1998	2,701
June 1998	3,065
July 1998	2,743
August 1998	2,272
September 1998	2,795
October 1998	2,742
November 1998	2,855
December 1998	2,375

Note:
Widows' Benefits include Widow's Pension and Widowed Mother's Allowance.

Incapacity Benefit claims since April 1998

Month	*Claims*
April 1998	74,588
May 1998	68,776
June 1998	78,552
July 1998	82,477
August 1998	71,181
September 1998	80,437
October 1998	81,324
November 1998	81,169
December 1998	66,767

Note:
The new claim figures are subject to amendment. A new claim may not necessarily result in the award of benefit.

Invalidity and Incapacity Benefits

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people received invalidity benefit in the last year it operated; and how many people received incapacity benefit in each of the years since it was introduced. [66631]

Mr. Bayley: Incapacity Benefit replaced Sickness Benefit and Invalidity Benefit on 13 April 1995. The short-term higher and long-term rates of Incapacity Benefit are equivalent to Invalidity Benefit. The available information is set out in the table.

Number of recipients of Invalidity Benefit/short-term higher and long-term Incapacity Benefit at the end of the statistical year

Year	*Number*
1994–95	1,766,900
1995–96	1,692,400
1996–97	1,632,060
1997–98	1,561,740

Note:
The 1994–95 statistical year ended 12 April 1995. From 1995–96 onwards the end of the statistical year is the last day in February.

Source:
DSS—Invalidity Benefit—1 per cent. sample of all claimants
DSS—Incapacity Benefit—5 per cent. computer sample, excludes a small number of cases not on the system

New Deal (Lone Parents)

Mr. McNulty: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many initial letters inviting lone parents to participate in the New Deal for Lone Parents have been issued; how many initial interviews have been booked; how many initial interviews have been carried out; how many lone parents have agreed to participate; and how many jobs have been obtained by lone parents participating in the New Deal for Lone Parents. [68045]

Mr. Darling: The information is as follows.

The National New Deal for Lone Parents started on 26 October 1998.

Latest information shows that from 21 July 1997 to 27 November 1998:

The number of letters issued[1] is 64,765

The number of initial interviews booked is 38,420

The number of initial interviews carried out is 28,762

The number of agreements to participate is 24,372.

A total of 5,689[2] jobs have been obtained by lone parents participating in the New Deal for Lone Parents.

The vast majority of lone parents who attend an initial interview decide to take part in the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP). This shows that we are offering a service that lone parents want.

Future NDLP results will be placed in the Library each month.

Notes:

[1] The management information for phases 1, 2 and 3 of NDLP differs slightly. The figure for "letters issued" does—for phase 1 only—also include contacts made by lone parents who had not received a letter from NDLP. In phase 1, this figure was entitled "contacts made".

[2] (i) Since 26 October 1998, the relevant period for the jobs obtained figure has differed slightly from that for the rest of the NDLP data. Therefore, while the "jobs obtained" figure relates to the period 21 July 1997 to 4 December 1998; all the other figures relate to the period 21 July 1997 to 27 November 1998.

(ii) The definition of "jobs obtained" includes only Employment Service (ES) job placings. This means that this figure does not include jobs obtained by lone parents who participate in NDLP but who find the job through a non-ES source. Since 26 October 1998 for example, another 146 lone parents participating in the NDLP have found jobs through a non-ES source with the help of their adviser. This figure is therefore likely to be an undercount of the total number of jobs obtained by lone parents participating in the NDLP.

(iii) From 21 July 1997 to 23 October 1998, the "jobs obtained" figure was defined as the first job obtained while participating in NDLP. However, since 26 October 1998 the "jobs obtained" figure has counted all ES placings, including those where a lone parent has obtained two jobs.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 27 January 1999

HEALTH

Multiple Sclerosis

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what advice has been sought by the East Surrey Health Authority from his Department in respect of providing services and treatment for multiple sclerosis. [65481]

Mr. Hutton: No specific advice has been sought by East Surrey Health Authority. The organisation of health services and the manner in which they are delivered, including services for people suffering from multiple sclerosis, is a matter for health authorities.

However, we are determined to challenge and address unacceptable variations in the provision of clinically and cost effective treatments, which are not based on the health needs of the local populations.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the Government's policy on the provision of Beta-interferon for the treatment of multiple sclerosis. [65488]

Mr. Hutton: Current guidance on Betaferon (Beta-Interferon-1b) recommends tht health authorities will have in place local arrangements with hospitals for purchasing and prescribing the drug in the light of medical evidence and local priorities.

Head Lice

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his policy for dealing with the spread of head lice among school pupils. [67033]

Mr. Hutton: Our policy is to encourage a "whole school approach" to the detection and treatment of head lice. This entails parents checking their children and other family members for head lice and arranging treatment where necessary, with such support from the local primary health care team as they may require. If this exercise is successfully undertaken on the same evening by all parents of children within a school, then the spread of head lice will be arrested.

Barnet Community Health Council

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will give *(a)* the names, *(b)* the terms of office and *(c)* the nominating body of the members of Barnet Community Health Council. [67035]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is shown in the tables.

Appointed by Local Authorities (12)
London Borough of Barnet

Member name	*First appointed*	*Terms*
Until 31 August 2000		
Ms Kate Brown	1 September 1996	First
Ms Pam Coleman	1 September 1992	Second
Mr. Raymond Mann	1 September 1996	First
Ms Katherine Rounce	1 September 1996	First
Until 31 August 2002		
Ms Fitzpatrick	1 September 1998	First
Mr. Roger Chapman	1 September 1994	Second
Mr. Alan Sloan	1 July 1995	First/Second
Mr. Hooker	1 September 1994	First
Ms Sandford	1 September 1998	First
Mr. Stern	1 September 1998	First

Appointed by voluntary organisations

Name	*Organisation*	*First appointed*	*Terms*
Until 31 August 2000			
Ms Evelyn Brand	League of Jewish Women	1 September 1996	First
Ms Jean Coops	Citizen's Advice Bureau	1 September 1996	First
Ms Rhoda Flynn	Barnet Mencap	1 September 1996	First
Ms Mary Leigh	Disablement Association	1 September 1996	First
Until 31 August 2002			
Ms Ruth Rees	Alzheimer's Disease Society	1 October 1995	First/Second
Ms Jean McEvoy	Barnet Borough Sight Impaired	1 September 1998	First
Mr. John Chappell	Barnet Carers Centre	1 September 1998	First
Ms Suzanne Collins	Mental Health Consultative Group	1 May 1996	First/Second

Appointed by the Secretary of State for Health

Name	*Date appointed*	*Terms*
Until 31 August 2000		
Ms Sally Malin	1 September 1996	First
Ms Elizabeth Manero	5 February 1995	Second
Until 31 August 2002		
Helen Barget	1 November 1998	First
Mrs. Janet Friend	1 September 1998	First

Ambulances

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he takes to assess value for money in the purchase of ambulances by health trusts; and if he will make a statement. [67219]

Mr. Hutton: The purchase of ambulance vehicles is the responsibility of individual National Health Service ambulance trusts. All NHS trusts are expected to adhere

to purchasing policies and procedures which ensure fitness for purpose, demonstrate best value for the NHS and maintain the highest standards of probity.

Bone Marrow Transplants

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people had a bone marrow transplant in the UK in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [67107]

Mr. Hutton: Provisional hospital episode statistic figures for National Health Service trusts in England show that there were 695 finished consultant episodes with a primary operation of autograft or allograft bone marrow operations in the financial year 1997–98.

Questions relating to residents who had bone marrow operations in NHS hospitals in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland are matters for my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Scotland, for Wales and for Northern Ireland respectively.

Beta Interferon

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the recommendations on beta interferon funding made by West Midlands Beta Interferon Management Group on 6 October 1998. [67049]

Ms Jowell: The West Midlands Beta Interferon Management Group's recommendation to chief executives of health authorities was to increase the region-wide budget for beta interferon to £1 million, to ensure continuation of treatment for existing patients and to facilitate the inclusion of more patients onto the programme in the West Midlands.

The health authorities are currently considering how to implement this recommendation.

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish the waiting list for beta interferon treatment drawn up by the West Midlands health authorities. [67050]

Ms Jowell: The information is not collected centrally, nor is it held by the West Midlands health authorities.

Aspirin and Paracetamol

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the health implications of variations in costs of the new aspirin and paracetamol pack sizes; and if he will make a statement. [67034]

Ms Jowell: The Department has made no specific assessment of the health implications of the variations in costs of the new analgesic pack sizes. However, variations in the prices of aspirin and paracetamol have always been a feature of this very competitive market and equivalent products continue to be available at a range of prices.

The Medicines Control Agency is monitoring the impact of the new pack sizes on public health and will review the effectiveness of the measures once sufficient data have been collected. They are currently consulting on a proposal to exempt low dose aspirin 75 milligramme from the new pack size restrictions.

Stroke Care

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the differences in care and outcome for stroke victims, according to the postal code of their address. [66843]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* None. Evidence-based national service frameworks are being developed to ensure consistent access and quality of care right across the country. In December 1998 we announced that the national service framework for older people would include stroke services.

Nurses

Mr. Syms: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many nurses worked for more than 48 hours a week in the last year, broken down by month. [67380]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not available centrally. The General Whitley Council (the national negotiating body for National Health Service staff with Whitley contracts) has agreed that an employee will not be expected to work more than a maximum of 48 hours averaged over 17 weeks in accordance with the Working Time Regulations. An employee may however agree to work over the 48 hour limit and will have to do so in writing to his employer.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Abortion Legislation

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans she has to review the abortion legislation in Northern Ireland; and if she will make a statement. [63040]

Marjorie Mowlam: The suggestion that the law on abortion in Northern Ireland should be reviewed has been made on a number of occasions, most recently in the report of the All Party Group on Population, Development and Reproductive Health, launched on 10 December 1998. I am still considering what, if any, action, should be taken in response to these suggestions.

I am, however, aware of the great strength of feeling on this issue, and the divergence of opinion that exists. I would want to reiterate most strongly the assurances already given by the Government, that we will not impose any change in Northern Ireland on this issue without consultation with elected representatives, including the Northern Ireland Assembly, and that any change would come about only with broad support from a cross-section of the people of Northern Ireland.

Environmentally Sensitive Areas

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how long it takes to process an application for grant aid under the Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme. [67030]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The average time, based on claims dealt with in the first 9 months of the current financial year, is 10.15 weeks.

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many applications were made for grant aid under the Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme *(a)* in each year from 1 April 1995 to 31 March 1998 and *(b)* from 1 April to 31 December 1998; of these (i) how many have been approved, (ii) what payments were made, (iii) how many were refused and (iv) how many are outstanding. [67031]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The figures are as follows:

	1995–96	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99 (to 31.12.98)*
Claims made	1,107	2,173	2,655	2,557
Claims paid	1,107	2,173	2,655	1,492
Approved	All	All	All	All
Refused	None	None	None	None
Outstanding	None	None	None	1,065
Payment total (£m)	1.619	2.752	4.921	4.477

"We Will Remember Them"

Mr. McNulty: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland with which groups she or other Ministers in her Department have had discussions as a consequence of the publication of Sir Kenneth Bloomfield's report, "We Will Remember Them". [68302]

Marjorie Mowlam: As part of the follow-up to Sir Kenneth Bloomfield's report, "We Will Remember Them", I, or one of my Northern Ireland Office Ministerial colleagues, have had discussions with representatives of the following groups:

Damien Walsh Group

Disabled Police Officers' Association

Families Acting for Innocent Relatives

Families Against Intimidation and Terror

Families of the Disappeared

Loughgall Truth and Justice Campaign

Prison Officers Association

Relatives for Justice

Survivors of Trauma

WAVE.

The Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride (Mr. Ingram), has established a 'Touchstone' Group, to enable a cross section of those representing victims interests to provide advice and support to him on the development of policy for victims. In this connection he has also met with representatives of the following organisations:

An Crann/The Tree

Cost of the Troubles Study

Kairos

Shankill Stress Group

UDR Benevolent Fund

Victim Support NI.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Burundi

Mr. Tony Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to introduce change of funding strategy for Burundi, moving beyond emergency relief towards more rehabilitation work; and what timeframe exists for this change. [67744]

Clare Short: A twin-track approach to the resumption of development assistance to Burundi was agreed at a donor meeting convened by UNDP on 11 January and attended by representatives of the Government of Burundi and ex-President Nyerere.

The international donor community agreed to provide immediate direct assistance to communities in Burundi focusing on local level reconciliation and rehabilitation. We already have the capacity to do this. It was also agreed that donors should prepare for the re-introduction of structural development assistance, which should follow the signature of a peace agreement. Burundi will need a substantial and well co-ordinated international effort to address its development constraints. Britain has not been a traditional bilateral donor to Burundi. But we will attempt to ensure that those multilateral organisations to which we are major contributors, including the EU and the World bank, are well prepared to make a major input when the political environment is right.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Magistrates Courts

Mr. Todd: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on progress on the Libra system for magistrates courts; and if he will make a statement. [67553]

Mr. Hoon: The Libra contract was awarded to International Computers Limited in December 1998. Libra will provide national standard computer services to magistrates' courts and offices with the first implementation planned for mid-2001 in Suffolk. The systems and services are expected to be implemented in all magistrates' courts by 2004, and will provide electronic links with other agencies in the criminal justice system.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department how many magistrates' courts committees have conducted formal access audits since his Department issued the Disabled Court Users Good Practice Guide for Magistrates' Courts Committees; and from what sources the funding for necessary changes will be provided. [67402]

Mr. Hoon: I issued a performance standard in December 1997 setting out the minimum standards of performance that magistrates' courts committees are required to achieve in relation to disabled court users. It is not a requirement that formal access audits be undertaken, however, the Good Practice Guide that accompanied this standard does recommend it.

A survey, undertaken by this Department during May and June 1998, showed that 64 out of 96 magistrates' courts committees had undertaken internal audits during the previous twelve months and 32 had arranged for

independent inspections. It is always open to any magistrates' courts committee, in conjunction with its local authorities, to bid for additional resources from this Department towards the cost of improving disabled access, subject, of course, to there being funding available.

Legal Aid (Mediation)

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department in how many cases, and at what cost, the Legal Aid Board has provided legal aid for dispute resolution by mediation. [67611]

Mr. Hoon: In the period December 1997 to December 1998, 1,962 mediations in family cases have been conducted as part of a pilot project. At this stage of the pilot project, it is not possible to provide exact cost per mediation as these costs include the cost of an initial information meeting with the clients, a contribution towards overheads and set up costs which enable mediation services to meet the requirements of the Legal Aid Board Family Mediation Franchise Specification. Legal aid has only been available for non-family cases since October 1998. It is at present not possible to provide information on the exact number or costs of non-family cases.

Solicitors (Professional Misconduct)

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department how many solicitors were disciplined for professional misconduct in each of the last five years. [67606]

Mr. Hoon: The Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal hears and determines applications relating to allegations of unbefitting conduct or breaches of the rules of professional misconduct. Under Section 47 of the Solicitors Act 1974, the Tribunal can make orders to strike off, suspend from practice, fine and reprimand solicitors found guilty of professional misconduct.

162 such orders were made from 1 May 1993 to 30 April 1994
206 such orders were made from 1 May 1994 to 30 April 1995
193 such orders were made from 1 May 1995 to 30 April 1996
171 such orders were made from 1 May 1996 to 30 April 1997
179 such orders were made from 1 May 1997 to 30 April 1998.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Home Detention

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the prisons from which prisoners are to be released on home detention curfew on 28 January 1999 and the number of prisoners to be released in each case. [67426]

Mr. George Howarth: The assessments for Home Detention Curfew are still ongoing. I will write to the hon. Member after 28 January 1999 when this information becomes available.

Polling Stations (Access)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has for the establishment of an independent electoral commission which would have responsibility for the provision of practical assistance to the elderly and those with disabilities in using polling stations. [67257]

Mr. George Howarth: As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced during the debate on the Neill Committee report on the funding of political parties on 9 November 1998, *Official Report*, column 55, provision for the establishment of an independent Electoral Commission will be included in the draft Bill, to implement the main findings of the Neill report, to be published before the summer recess. The Government are currently giving careful consideration to the Neill Committee's detailed proposals with regard to the precise role and remit of the Electoral Commission.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made in improving access to polling stations for people with physical impairments. [67258]

Mr. George Howarth: Consolidated and enhanced guidance which includes advice on national access standards will be issued to all returning officers shortly. The Working Party on electoral procedures which I am chairing will continue to consider disability access to electoral services of all kinds.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if a person who has been refused political asylum but granted indefinite leave to remain in the United Kingdom has the right to appeal to a special adjudicator about the decision to refuse political asylum. [67109]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: There is no right of appeal against a refusal to grant asylum in these circumstances.

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what research has been carried out on the comparative costs of *(a)* current arrangements for funding asylum seekers and *(b)* restoring benefits for asylum seekers, during the period that his Department takes to process an application. [67043]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The evidence available suggests that the removal of access to benefits to those asylum seekers who do not make their claim at their port of entry leads to a significant reduction in the numbers of asylum seekers. The Government believe that cash is a strong factor in encouraging economic migrants and that the restoration of benefits would lead to a significantly higher number of asylum seekers thereby leading to a much greater cost than the current arrangements. These conclusions come from an examination of the publicly available data.

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people were granted *(a)* refugee status and *(b)* exceptional leave to remain following a successful appeal against refusal of that status in each year since 1993, broken down by country of origin. [67112]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I regret that this information could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. Information on the number of allowed asylum appeals over the period 1994 to 1998 is available and this is given in the table.

Asylum appeals under the 1993 and 1996 Acts determined by adjudicators of the Immigration Appeals Authority, excluding dependants, 1994 to 1998

Year	Appeals determined [2]	Appeals allowed [3]	Percentage of appeals allowed
1993	n/a	n/a	n/a
1994	2,440	105	4
1995	7,035	230	3
1996	13,792	515	4
1997	21,090	1,180	6
1998[1]	25,320	2,750	11

[1] Provisional data
[2] Based on information collected by the Lord Chancellor's Department
[3] Estimates based on information collected by the Asylum Directorate

Police Federation

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what central Government payments have been made to the Police Federation in each of the last five years in support of *(a)* conferences organised by the Federation and *(b)* other purposes; and if he will indicate the statutory authority under which such payments are made. [67028]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is shown in the table. The only payments made in support of conferences are in respect of travel and subsistence expenses made for members of the Joint Central Committee and these cannot readily be shown separately from expenses paid for other purposes. Payments are made under sections 57(1) and 60(2)(d) of the Police Act 1996.

(a) Home Office/common police service contribution towards the costs of the salaries and running costs of the Police Federation of England and Wales

£

	Police Federation of England and Wales	
	Salaries	Running costs
1994–95	110,000	57,000
1995–96	51,000	57,000
1996–97	93,000	54,900
1997–98	50,439	48,259
1998–99[1]	60,211	54,500

(b) Contribution received as a member of the staff side of the police negotiating board

£

	Police Federations of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland	
	Administrative costs	Travelling and subsistence expenses
1994–95	8,441	54,627
1995–96	17,800	62,914
1996–97	18,200	64,300
1997–98	18,185	32,602
1998–99[1]	17,479	33,262

[1] Estimate

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans the Government have to remove the United Kingdom's reservation on Article 37 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. [67216]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We do not propose to remove this reservation. We are establishing a separate juvenile estate, but there will continue to be occasions when the mixing of young offenders and adult prisoners is necessary. This may be due to a lack of suitable accommodation or adequate facilities for a particular young person.

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many reservations and derogations the UK Government have entered under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. [67214]

Mr. Hutton: I have been asked to reply.

Upon ratification in 1991 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, the United Kingdom Government entered four reservations and two declaratory interpretations.

Police Manpower

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will provide a breakdown, by rank, of the numbers of police officers *(a)* per police force and *(b)* in total, in each of the last 10 years. [67586]

Mr. Boateng: Information in the form requested is available from 1991. For earlier years, only information on the total number of officers in each force is available. The details for each year between 1989 and 1998 are set out in the tables, which I have placed in the Library.

Jury Trials

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) when he plans to publish the responses to his consultation paper on the right to trial by jury; [67582]

(2) what research he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into the election of trial in the Crown Court by defendants charged with an either-way offence since 1 October 1997; [67580]

(3) what steps he plans to take regarding the right to trial by jury following his consultation paper of July 1998; and if he will make a statement. [67583]

Mr. Boateng: No research has been conducted into the election of trial in the Crown Court by defendants charged with an either-way offence since 1 October 1997. The consultation paper on determining the mode of trial, considered whether defendants should be able to choose to be tried by a jury in cases which magistrates have indicated that they would be content to hear. We are currently considering the responses to this consultation exercise and will make a statement when we have reached a final decision.

Firearms Certificates

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many section 5 firearms certificates he has issued in each of the last five years. [67767]

Mr. Boateng: The authority of the Secretary of State to possess, purchase or acquire, manufacture, sell or transfer weapons and ammunition prohibited by section 5 of the Firearms Act 1968 (as amended) is granted only to those applicants who can demonstrate a genuine need to have such weapons and ammunition. The total number of such authorities issued in England and Wales in each of the last five years is as follows:

Year	*Authorities issued*
1998	540
1997	320
1996	304
1995	261
1994	214

CS Spray

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to collect information on the number of times police officers and members of the public have started legal proceedings because of injuries caused by CS sprays. [67609]

Mr. Boateng: This information is not held centrally and there are no plans to collect it.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

A14

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many *(a)* personal injury accidents and *(b)* fatalities were recorded on the A14 between Cambridge and Huntingdon in 1998. [66734]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The information requested will not be available until June 1999. The latest available full years data are shown in the table.

Accidents/casualties on the A14 between Cambridge and Huntingdon: 1997

Severity	*Number of accidents*	*Number of casualties*
Fatal	1	1
Serious	10	12
Slight	50	79
Total	61	92

Vehicles Directive

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement about progress at the Environment Council meeting on 21 December 1998 on the proposed Directive on end of life vehicles. [67340]

Mr. Meale: At the Environment Council, Ministers reached a degree of common understanding on many of the important issues raised by this Directive. However, the views of the European Parliament will need to be carefully considered and final decisions on the Council's Common Position will not be taken until the next Environmental Council in March, when the European Parliament's opinion should be ready.

Whipps Cross-Redbridge Relief Road

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what representations his Department has received concerning the delay in opening the Whipps Cross-Redbridge relief road; [67458]

(2) how much money has been spent on the Whipps Cross-Redbridge relief road; [67459]

(3) when the Whipps Cross-Redbridge relief road will be completed; [67461]

(4) what the projected opening date was for the Whipps Cross-Redbridge relief road on 1 May 1997. [67460]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Lawrie Haynes, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Lawrie Haynes to Mr. David Amess, dated 27 January 1999:

The Minister for Transport in London has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions about the Whipps Cross/ Redbridge Relief Road.

I am assuming that you are referring to Contract 4 of the A12 Hackney to M11 Link Road which goes from Whipps Cross to the Redbridge roundabout on the A12.

On 1 May 1997, we anticipated that the contract would be completed in the Spring of 1998.

Several local people, including the local Member of Parliament, have asked about the cause of the delay and we have explained that there have been difficulties with the specialist equipment necessary for safety in the tunnel at George Green. We now expect the road to be open to traffic this Spring although finishing work could take a little longer. This does not affect the overall completion date of Autumn 1999.

The cost to date of the works on Contract 4 is £53.2M (excluding VAT).

Departmental Papers (Access for Visually Impaired)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for departmental *(a)* White and *(b)* Green Papers to be made available on floppy disk format in a form which facilitates access for the visually impaired. [67852]

Mr. Meale: The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions currently publishes all White and Green Papers in HTML format on its Internet site. This ensures easy access by systems such as "screen readers, text-to-speech and text to Braille converters" making documents more accessible to the visually impaired.

Where appropriate, publications are also made available on audio tape, in large print, Braille or on floppy disk.

Water-borne Freight

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to achieve an increase in water-borne freight; if he will set targets; and if he will make a statement. [67618]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* The Government are keen to encourage increased movement of freight by water where that is a practical and economic option. The Department currently gives Freight Facilities Grants for inland waterways schemes where freight would otherwise have gone by road. The Department will be re-examining the rules of the scheme to encourage more applications for inland waterways projects; and as announced in the White Paper on the Future of Integrated Transport, we intend to bring forward legislation to extend the application of the freight grant scheme to include coastal and short-sea shipping. The scheme is demand-led and the Department aims, as far as possible, to meet all eligible demand from within its budget. Since May 1997 there have been 5 inland waterway grants made totalling almost £1.65m, which represents a maximum of 770,000 tonnes. In addition the total 1998–99 budget for both rail and inland waterway schemes has been increased from the previous year by one-third to £40 million.

In addition, the Department is working to update planning guidance on transport which will encourage more freight to be carried by water. Local authorities in their development plans will be expected to consider opportunities for new development which are served by waterways; and to give better protection to sites and routes, both existing and potential, which could be critical in developing infrastructure to widen transport choices, including water transport.

Water Pollution (Costs)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the costs of agriculturally derived water pollution from *(a)* nitrates, *(b)* fertilisers generally, (c)pesticides and other biocides and (d) soil erosion; and if he will make a statement. [67714]

Mr. Meale: The environmental and economic costs of agriculturally derived water pollution are not available centrally and can be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Classic and Vintage Vehicles (Leaded Petrol)

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what studies his Department has undertaken on the effect of the phasing out of leaded petrol on classic and vintage vehicles; how many vehicles currently run on leaded petrol; what is the statutory basis for the change; and if he will make a statement. [67632]

Ms Glenda Jackson: In accordance with EU directive 98/70EC, leaded petrol will be banned from general sale from 1 January 2000 by regulations to be made under the Clean Air Act 1993. Of an estimated 6 million vehicles currently running on leaded petrol, about 5.3 million will still be doing so at the time the ban is introduced. Of these as many as 3 million could use unleaded petrol either directly or with simple engine adjustments. For a remaining 2.3 million, for which lead provides lubricant protection for soft valve seats and in some cases octane requirements, substitutes for lead, either in the form of additives incorporated in "lead replacement petrol" or provided separately for motorists' use will be made available by the oil companies. Such products will be suitable for classic and vintage vehicles as well as older vehicles generally. The Government are in addition exploring the possibilities for implementation of the provision in the directive which allows sales of leaded petrol to continue to a limit of 0.5 per cent. of total sales, though supply will ultimately be a commercial decision.

Aircraft Emissions

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research his Department has commissioned or carried out on the effect of emissions from aircraft with particular reference to the upper atmosphere; and if he will list such research. [67470]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Since May 1997 my Department has participated in the following research projects:

AEROTRACE: identification and measurement of trace species in exhaust gases close to the combustor of a jet engine;

UK TRACE: measurement of changes in trace species between the combustor and engine exhaust;

AEROCERT: identification of possible revisions and extensions to engine certification procedures, and the effects of maintenance and operation on certified emission levels;

POLINAT: measurement and modelling of aircraft emissions in the North Atlantic flight corridor.

We also supported the development of the European inventory of emissions from aircraft worldwide, which was published last year.

Maintenance Vehicles (Safety Belts)

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the consequences of excluding maintenance vehicles from the laws enforcing the wearing of vehicle safety belts; and if he will make a statement. [67359]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Maintenance vehicles are not exempt from the requirement that seat belts must be worn where they are available. There are specific exemptions for drivers in particular circumstances—these are listed in regulation 6 of The Motor Vehicles (Wearing of Seat Belts) Regulations 1993, SI 1993 No. 176.

Building Stock

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the increase in building stock over the next 10 years; and what plans he has to reduce carbon dioxide emissions from buildings by 2010. [67689]

Mr. Meale: The Government intend to develop a balanced and equitable strategy across all sectors to meet the UK's climate change targets. As a first step, on 26 October 1998, the Government published a consultation paper describing progress to date in reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the UK and setting out a variety of policy options for further action. The consultation paper refers to a number of options which could be taken to reduce carbon dioxide emissions including improvements in emissions from buildings in the commercial, industrial and domestic sectors.

Planning Applications

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which local authority headed his table which measured the speed with which planning applications were considered. [67875]

Mr. Raynsford: In the 12 months to September 1998, Worthing Borough Council headed the Planning Performance Checklist, determining 99.9 per cent. of planning applications within 8 weeks.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the average length of time taken by local authorities to process planning applications in 1997–98. [67877]

Mr. Raynsford: In 1997–98, district planning authorities in England decided 62 per cent. of all applications for planning permission and other related consents within 8 weeks and 84 per cent. within 13 weeks. Information is not available on the average length of time taken to determine a planning application.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidelines are issued to local authorities in respect of the processing of planning applications. [67878]

Mr. Raynsford: The Government's policies on different aspects of planning are contained in Planning Policy Guidance notes (PPGs) and Circulars. PPG1 on "General Policy and Principles" gives general advice on a number of issues bearing on the consideration of planning permission. Environment Circular 9/95, "General Development Order Consolidation 1995", covers permitted development and more detailed procedural matters, including consultations before the grant of planning permission. It also contains advice on best practice in handling planning applications.

Health and Safety Executive (Workplace Deaths)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many incidents of death in the workplace were investigated by the Health and Safety Executive in each year since 1996. [67416]

Mr. Meale: The number of fatalities investigated by the Health and Safety Executive is set out in the table.

Year	*Number of fatalities investigated*
1996–97	397
1997–98	402
1 April-30 September 1998[1]	213

[1] Provisional

Dock Work

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the health and safety implications of increased casualisation of dock work. [67417]

Mr. Meale: It is not possible to assess how recent changes in the patterns of employment in the docks industry have affected health and safety. Such changes have included increasing mechanisation, bulk handling and containerisation at the same time as a substantial reduction in the numbers working in the docks. The Health and Safety Executive regularly meets docks industry representatives to review trends and consider any issues which might affect health and safety.

Birmingham Northern Relief Road

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the impact of the Birmingham northern relief road on the air quality levels as set out in the National Air Quality Strategy; and how he expects any breaches of the levels to be remedied. [67577]

Mr. Meale: The original air quality assessment for the Birmingham northern relief road was published within the environmental statement for the scheme in 1993. Additional evidence was submitted to the public inquiry in 1994.

The United Kingdom National Air Quality Strategy, published in March 1997, post-dated both the original assessment and the public inquiry. However, the existence of the air quality objectives within the strategy was acknowledged in the decision letter for the scheme as a post-inquiry development which had to be taken into account, alongside the Inspector's report, in reaching a decision on whether or not to proceed. A judgment was made, based on an interpretation of the previous assessment work, on whether or not the objectives might be exceeded. It was concluded that all of the objectives, with the possible exception of that for PM_{10}, would be met with the road in place.

Under Part IV of the Environment Act 1995, local authorities must review and assess air quality within their areas. If a local authority decides that any of the air quality objectives are not likely to be met by 2005, it must designate an Air Quality Management Area covering the area of the predicted exceedance and produce an action plan for the achievement of the objectives. The Highways Agency would need to be closely involved in the development and implementation of any action plan which required measures to be taken in relation to a trunk road or motorway.

Road Schemes

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will name the road schemes by each local authority which make up the existing commitments in the Local Transport Settlement 1999–2000; and if he will indicate for each *(a)* the money awarded in the 1999–2000 local transport settlement and *(b)* the total costs. [67021]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* The table shows allocations made to grant supported major road schemes as part of the 1999–2000 local transport capital settlement. These schemes were accepted for funding between the 1986–87 and 1997–98 settlements. The Government are committed to providing sufficient funding for their completion, provided they continue to make reasonable progress, although we do not commit to fund the full costs of a major local road scheme. The table does not include committed expenditure on non-road schemes or resources which cannot be identified to a single road scheme, such as resources to meet applications during 1999–00 for grant under the Industrial Development Act 1982.

Authority	Scheme name	Allocation (£000)	Total gross cost (£000)
Lincolnshire	Market Deeping Bypass	410	11,378
Newcastle upon Tyne	West Central Route	4,500	21,709
Redcar and Cleveland	Skelton and Brotton Bypass	2,500	13,500
Cheshire	Chester Park and Ride Phase Two	1,000	7,858
Cheshire	Wheelock Bypass	2,200	11,600
Lancashire	South Ribble M65 Interface Improvements	2,800	12,847
Oldham	A62/A627 Oldham Way Improvements	300	6,981
Trafford	Trafford Road Improvement	282	23,952
Buckinghamshire	Tingewick Bypass	282	13,274
East Sussex	New Route (Dittons to Seaside) Eastbourne	2,200	29,370
Kent	Barracks Link Ashford	250	4,487
Kent	South Thames-Side Development Route Stage 4	4,000	14,480
Kent	Wainscott Northern Bypass	24,250	77,139
Kent	Thanet Way Dualling (Sections 1–7A)	8,000	191,405
Medway Towns	Gillingham Northern Bypass	2,584	44,685
Surrey	Runfold Diversion/Blackwater Valley Route A31-A323	1,500	50,059
Dorset	A37 Improvements	120	9,029
Gloucestershire	Gloucester South West Bypass	2,654	21,022
Somerset	Yeovil to Dorset Boundary Phase 1	1,430	5,842
Somerset	Wells Relief Road	700	14,422
South Gloucestershire	Avon Ring Road II: B4465 Shortwood—A420 Warmley	9,700	29,961
Dudley	Dudley Southern Bypass	9,000	57,000
Solihull	West Midlands Renaissance Area	300	18,878
Wolverhampton	Wednesfield Bypass and Industrial Access	1,400	23,819
Barnsley	Dearne Towns Link Road	1,000	40,422
Leeds	Leeds City Centre Loop Phase 3	700	6,989
Leeds	Leeds Inner Ring Road Stages 6 and 7	3,800	78,821
North East Lincolnshire	Grimsby, Peakes Parkway	1,600	25,991
Hertfordshire	Cheshunt Link Road	220	16,652
Peterborough	Werrington to Glinton Phase 2	748	1,752
Bexley	Erith-Thamesmead Spine Road (Phase IV)	712	34,499
Greenwich	Woolwich Road Improvement	2,114	24,828
Harrow	A409 Sheepcote Road Widening for two-way traffic	524	2,905
Harrow	A409 Wealdstone By Pass	292	16,517
Hillingdon	Uxbridge Town Centre	350	2,329
Kensington and Chelsea	Harrow Road Junction with Ladbrooke Grove	516	9,171
Kingston upon Thames	North—South Strategy—A240 Corridor	800	4,730
Knowsley	M57—A562 Link Road	1,000	47,607
Sefton	Aintree, Park Lane Improvement	2,000	3,936
Total		98,738	1,037,489

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many local authorities have formally asked his Department for the routes of road schemes withdrawn in the National Roads Programme to be protected as advised in paragraph 96 of the draft guidance on Local Transport Plans. [67023]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* To date no local authorities have formally indicated whether they intend to seek route protection for any of the schemes on routes to be detrunked which were withdrawn from the National Roads Programme as a result of the Roads Review. But, two authorities have proposed that route protection should be retained beyond the end of July pending the outcome of further studies.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the number of major new road schemes for which each local authority bid for funding under the TPP system for 1999–2000. [67022]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* We received eighty bids for new major local road schemes from English local highway authorities requesting capital funding in 1999–2000. The following authorities bid for one major scheme each: Lincolnshire, Northumberland, Stockton-on-Tees, Halton, Salford, West Yorkshire PTA, Buckinghamshire, Kent, Milton Keynes, Oxfordshire, West Sussex, Windsor and Maidenhead, Bath and North East Somerset, Bristol, Birmingham, Sandwell, Warwickshire, Barnsley, Kirklees, Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Bexley, Enfield, Greenwich and St. Helens. Authorities bidding for two or more schemes are shown in the table:

Authority	Number of new major road scheme bids
Leicestershire	2
Nottinghamshire	5
Surrey	4
Cornwall	4
Devon	2
Gloucestershire	2
Somerset	2
Staffordshire	3
Stoke-on-Trent	2
West Midlands Joint authorities[1]	9
Worcestershire	2
Doncaster	3

Authority	Number of new major road scheme bids
Luton	2
Norfolk	7
Sutton	2
Westminster	2
Total	80

[1] the bid from the West Midlands Joint authorities was submitted on behalf of Birmingham, Centro, Coventry, Dudley, Sandwell, Solihull, Walsall and Wolverhampton authorities.

As announced in the local transport capital settlement for 1999–2000 on 17 December 1998, we accepted two of these schemes.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the mileage rates currently applicable to staff, indicating what changes have been made to encourage staff to switch from cars to public transport and other less polluting forms of travel. [67489]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* Staff are encouraged to use public transport where it is available and if they do not do so, a single flat rate of 23.8 pence per mile is payable. Where public transport is not available, would give rise to excessive journey times or where staff have equipment or bulky luggage to carry, there are currently two sets of mileage rates payable for cars used on official business:

Pence per mile

Engine capacity	Ex-Department of the Environment staff		Ex-Department of Transport staff	
	Up to 4000 miles	Over 4000 miles	Up to 4000 miles	Over 4000 miles
Up to 1000 cc	N/A		27	15
1001 cc to 1500 cc	34	19	35.7	19
1501 cc to 2000 cc	43	23	42	23
Over 2000 cc	47	30	46	30

The rates are currently under review not only to harmonise them but also as part of the Department's aim to encourage staff to minimise journeys by car and reduce the environmental impact of transport activity through Green Transport Plans. Consideration is being given to a single rate, regardless of engine size.

London Underground

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he has received a Public/Private Partnership bid from Railtrack for the surface and sub-surface London Underground lines outside the criteria for the tender process. [67923]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government have not sought or received any bid from Railtrack in relation to the London Underground public/private partnership (PPP).

Railtrack has made proposals to integrate London Underground's sub-surface lines (Circle, District, Metropolitan, and Hammersmith and City) with the main line network. The Office of Passenger Rail Franchising (OPRAF) is carrying out a preliminary study of the feasibility, costs and benefits of these proposals and is assessing them in the same way that it would any other such proposals. This work does not in any way imply that the Government believe that a case has been established for Railtrack's proposal on cost-benefit or other grounds, or that London Transport is minded to handle the sub-surface lines differently from the deep tube lines in the PPP.

The Government are continuing to develop the London Underground PPP along the lines announced to the House by the Deputy Prime Minister on 14 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns 629–30.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Death by Dangerous Driving (Sentences)

Mr. Randall: To ask the Attorney-General how many cases of causing death by dangerous driving have been referred to him for reference to the Court of Appeal on the grounds of unduly lenient sentence in the last 18 months; how many he has referred to the Court of Appeal; and how many sentences have been increased as a result of such referrals. [67657]

The Attorney-General: Since 27 July 1997 19 cases of causing death by dangerous driving in England and Wales have been referred to the Law Officers. 12 were referred by members of the public (3 through their MPs); 7 were referred by the CPS.

Of these 19, 1 case has not yet been considered; in 13 cases the sentence passed was not considered unduly lenient; 5 cases have been referred to the Court of Appeal. The sentence was increased by the Court of Appeal in 4 cases (although in one case the overall sentence, taking into account two other offences, was not increased). 1 case has yet to be heard.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Scottish Land Fund

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what powers the Scottish Parliament will have to *(a)* alter policy priorities in Scotland for the New Opportunities Fund and *(b)* increase the proportion of New Opportunities Fund money which goes to the Scottish Land Fund; [67421]

(2) if he will make a statement on the powers of the *(a)* Scottish Parliament, *(b)* Welsh assembly and *(c)* Northern Ireland assembly to direct or alter the distribution of lottery funds by each of the lottery distribution bodies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; [67419]

(3) if he will make a statement outlining the mechanism under which payments will be made to the proposed Scottish Land Fund from the New Opportunities Fund; and who will decide the level of payments made from the New Opportunities Fund into the proposed Scottish Land Fund. [67420]

Mr. Banks *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* The power currently held by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland to issue policy directions to Scottish sports and arts Lottery distributors will be transferred to Ministers of the Scottish Parliament. In relation to the Heritage Lottery Fund, the National Lottery Charities Board and the New Opportunities Fund (NOF), whose operations range across the UK, Scottish Ministers will be able to make directions which require distributors to take into account for their activities in Scotland the desirability of achieving particular objectives for devolved policy areas including giving priority to particular kinds of recipients, or recipients in particular parts of Scotland. In the case of a NOF initiative applying only in Scotland, Scottish Ministers will after consultation with the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport be able to make the order specifying the initiative, and to issue directions on any matter except the amount of funding to be allocated to the initiative. Powers in relation to the Millennium Commission will remain unchanged since most of its work is now complete. Scottish Ministers will not be able to make directions relating to the allocation of resources between Scotland and other parts of the United Kingdom, or those relating to the administration of Lottery funding, regardless of the purposes to be achieved by particular projects. Scottish Ministers will however be consulted on these matters as they affect Scotland.

Similar arrangements will apply to the National Assembly for Wales, although any order specifying a Wales only initiative of the New Opportunities Fund would be made by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport with the agreement of the Assembly. The details of these arrangements, including their application to a Northern Ireland Assembly, are still under consideration. Concordats being drawn up between my department and home country departments will set out how the new arrangements will work.

There has been widespread public consultation on the three new NOF initiatives, which include one on green spaces and sustainable communities which could in Scotland constitute a Scottish Land Fund. Consultation on this initiative closed on 15 January and no decisions have yet been made regarding the final form of the initiatives or the financial allocations. After consultation with Scottish Ministers, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport will decide the level of funding each initiative will receive and has the power to direct that a percentage of this amount be used in Scotland. NOF will administer the grant-giving process, taking into account the directions they have been given and decide which applicants should be supported.

Foreign Broadcasters

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what plans he has to extend the jurisdiction of the ITC and the scope of the Broadcasting Acts to companies based abroad who, through cable, broadcast in the United Kingdom; [66257]

(2) how he intends to ensure that the political impartiality required by the Broadcasting Acts is maintained in respect of broadcasts being made in the United Kingdom by companies based abroad; and if he will make a statement. [66256]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 20 January 1999]:* Transfrontier broadcasting in Europe is regulated, in the European Economic Area, by Council Directive 89/552/EEC, as amended by Council Directive 97/36/EC ("The Broadcasting Directive"). Outside this area it is regulated by the European Convention on Transfrontier Television of the Council of Europe. Both legal instruments enshrine the "home State" principle; where a broadcaster is under the jurisdiction of one State, and hence licensed by that State, it may transmit freely to all others, provided that the minimum standards of the Directive or Convention are complied with. The Independent Television Commission may not extend its jurisdiction over such broadcasters, whether they broadcast by means of cable or satellite in the United Kingdom. Conversely, an ITC licensed broadcaster cannot be under the jurisdiction of any other State. By these means, a free market in legitimately licensed broadcasting services has been created throughout Europe.

European public service broadcasters are expected to observe principles of political impartiality and balance in their coverage of news and current affairs. This is regulated by the competent authorities in individual States. Any concern about political impartiality in a programme from abroad would need to be taken up on a bilateral basis either with the relevant regulatory authority or with the relevant Government.

Tourism (Training and Accommodation)

Sir Peter Emery: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what proposals his Department has to raise the standards of *(a)* staff training and *(b)* accommodation in the tourist industry. [67357]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* National Training Organisations (NTOs) are already working to ensure that training and development products are of high quality with a strong emphasis on transferable skills.

Current accommodation inspection schemes aim to identify and promote establishments to the public so that they can use them with confidence, through a system of facility classification and quality grading. The English Tourist Board, the AA and the RAC are now harmonising their accommodation schemes. The new harmonised accommodation rating scheme, being launched to consumers in September 1999, places far more emphasis on quality and will remove the confusion caused by the plethora of signs, and the lack of clarity about what to expect from each kind of serviced accommodation.

Further, our new tourism strategy, which will be published soon, aims to create a competitive world class tourism industry which provides affordable quality, is open to all and makes wise use of resources. The strategy contains specific recommendations for action to develop a trained and motivated work force in the industry and to improve the quality of tourist accommodation.

Tourism (Devon)

Sir Peter Emery: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much Government money per head of population was spent on tourism and tourist attractions in Devon in the most recent year for which figures are available. [67317]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* Government funding for the national tourist boards supports tourism in Devon and every other county. In 1998–99, some £35 million will go to the British Tourist Authority (BTA) and £9.7 million to the English Tourist Board (ETB). The ETB in turn grants around £504,000 to the West Country Tourist Board (WCTB) which covers Devon and other counties in the South West of England. It is not possible to distinguish support for Devon from support for other counties.

Tourism also benefits from Lottery awards and funds from European programmes. In 1998–99, lottery awards of over £8 million (just over £7.50 per head of population) and over £1.4 million (just over £1.30 per head of population) from various European programmes has so far been granted to projects in Devon from which tourism stands to benefit.

In addition, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy estimates that in 1997–98 local authority expenditure on tourism promotion in Devon was just over £2.8 million (over £2.60 per head of population).

New Opportunities Fund (ICT Training)

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport by what date New Opportunities Fund moneys for information and communication technology skills training for teachers will be available to schools. [67384]

Mr. Banks *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* The New Opportunities Fund (NOF) will be sending information to schools, including details of how to apply for their funding entitlement and how to use it, in Spring 1999. The aim is that training for teachers and school librarians can begin—in schools—in Summer term 1999. Funding from NOF will be available to schools from mid-April.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list, for the delivery of information and communications technology skills training for teachers funded by the New Opportunities Fund, the organisations which *(a)* expressed interest in applying to become approved providers, *(b)* formally applied to become approved providers and *(c)* have been accepted as approved providers. [67391]

Mr. Banks: The New Opportunities Fund (NOF) is currently completing an approval process within which prospective providers have to demonstrate the skills and experience necessary to deliver high quality training in information and communication technology (ICT).

Some 3,500 organisations applied for the specification for training providers. Of this number 194 (England), 38 (Scotland), 38 (Wales), and 21 (Northern Ireland) made formal applications. The names of successful applicants will be published when final decisions have been taken.

Royal Society of Literature

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to meet the chairman of the Royal Society of Literature. [65574]

Mr. Alan Howarth: I will be meeting the Chairman of the Royal Society of Literature on 18 February.

DEFENCE

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he has made of the percentage of his Department's systems which might be affected by millennium compliance failure by other Departments, public or private companies and international Government and non-governmental systems. [66752]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 21 January 1999]:* We are discussing this issue with our major suppliers, and are seeking assurances of continuity of supply from them and from their suppliers in turn.

Defence systems have relatively little dependence on systems in other Departments. We are liaising closely with our allies to identify the many international inter-dependencies and are working with them to ensure that allied and joint operations will not be adversely affected by the millennium date-change. These dependencies range from individual components to linkage between systems. Information on the number of such dependencies is not readily available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Dounreay

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on steps taken recently at the Vulcan Naval Reactor Test Establishment at Dounreay to enhance protection measures against earthquakes; and if he will estimate the cost of this work. [66424]

Mr. Spellar: Work is taking place at the Vulcan Naval Reactor Test Establishment at Dounreay to enhance protection against a number of potential hazards, including earthquakes, while preparing the facility for a further period of operation. Modifications are required to enable the facility to meet standards directly equivalent to those required by the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate for modern civil nuclear facilities. The cost of work related to enhanced protection measures against earthquakes is estimated to be about £9 million.

Infra-red Technology

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of investment by other Government departments into infra-red technology for use in the defence industry. [66670]

Mr. Spellar: None. Government investment in technology specifically intended for defence purposes would, however, be expected to fall primarily to the MOD.

Royal Navy Personnel

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many service personnel, of which ranks, are currently attached to each Royal Navy vessel *(a)* mothballed and *(b)* awaiting refit. [66702]

Mr. Doug Henderson: HMS Ark Royal is at present undergoing preservation by dehumidification and HMS Intrepid is currently on standby. Staffing levels of the two ships as at 1 January 1999 were as follows:

Ship/current role	*Rank*	*Manning levels*
HMS Ark Royal		
(Preservation by Dehumidification)	Commander	1
	Junior Officers	6
	Senior Rates	26
	Junior Rates	33
		66
HMS Intrepid		
Standby (Preservation by Operation)	Commander	1
	Junior Officers	4
	Senior Rates including 1 Royal Marine	31
	Junior Rates including 2 Royal Marines	41
		77

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the annual cost of the service personnel currently attached to *(a)* HMS Ark Royal and *(b)* HMS Intrepid. [66701]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The annual cost of the service personnel currently attached to HMS Ark Royal and HMS Intrepid is some £1.7 million and £1.9 million respectively.

Trident

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library copies of the British equivalent of the US Department of the Navy SP10 Memo 4900 SP131522 relating to UK Trident purchases in the US from fiscal year 1984 to date. [67040]

Mr. George Robertson: I am assuming that the documents which my hon. Friend is seeking are the UK's responses to the US Department of the Navy's budget authorisation requests. Copies of UK budget authorisations going back to 1984 are not held centrally and could only be provided at disproportionate cost. I have, however, arranged for the authorisations for the last six US fiscal years to be placed in the Library.

More comprehensive estimates of UK Trident acquisitions and running costs were included in the Strategic Defence Review Supporting Essay Five.

Nuclear Fuel

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions have taken place with United States Government officials concerning the possibility of Britain meeting future US tritium requirements. [67212]

Mr. George Robertson: There are regular contacts and exchanges of information between the United States and the United Kingdom on nuclear matters under the aegis of the 1958 Agreement between the Governments of the United Kingdom and the United States on "Co-operation in the Use of Atomic Energy for Mutual Defence Purposes" Command 537 as amended. These contacts have included discussions on tritium requirements.

Chapelcross Nuclear Reactors

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions his Department has had with the DETR regarding the implications of the OSPAR agreement for continued operation of the Chapelcross tritium production facility. [67211]

Mr. Spellar: The MOD has not yet held discussions with the Department of the Environment, Transport, and Regions (DETR) on this matter. However, nuclear operators are having to consider how to achieve the targets set by OSPAR in July 1998 for reductions in discharges. I understand that the DETR are shortly to start discussions with operators, including BNFL who operate Chapelcross, so that proposals and programmes can be produced for presentation to OSPAR in 2000.

SCOTLAND

Children (Scotland) Act 1995

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to review the operation of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. [66634]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 is already kept under review in a number of ways. It was identified as a research priority area in 1996 and a number of research studies have been commissioned across a wide range of the Act's provisions. Progress is reported through a series of research bulletins, copies of which are in the Library.

The operation of the Act is also reviewed regularly through inspections by the Social Work Services Inspectorate, publication of statistical information and a joint Scottish Office/COSLA working group set up for that purpose. A further indication of the effectiveness of the 1995 Act will come from the regular review of local authority children's services plans, which were required

to be in place from April 1998. Taken together, the information from these sources allow effective oversight of the Act to be maintained.

From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Adoption and Fostering

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to gather and publish information about adoption and fostering in Scotland to record the numbers of children being placed, their ages and their care history. [66635]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* Information on adoptions in Scotland is collected and published regularly. The next publication, for the year ending December 1998, is planned for March 1999 and will contain information on numbers of children adopted, their age distributions and whether the local authority was involved in the adoption.

Information on the numbers of children looked after by foster carers is collected annually at an aggregate level. The latest data, for the year to March 1998, were published in December 1998. It is planned to publish an annual information note on the background of children who cease to be looked after during the year but without specifically identifying those children who were in foster care. There are no plans to collect or publish care histories on individual children.

From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Care in the Community

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what sums his Department currently allocates to councils for each person provided with residential accommodation under Care in the Community. [66636]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* The allocations of resources to councils for their community care responsibilities are calculated with reference to a range of indicators, and not by allocating a sum per person. These indicators are agreed in consultation with COSLA.

The resultant distribution forms part of each council's Grant Aided Expenditure assessment which individual authorities allocate to services on the basis of local need. The Grant Aided Expenditure allocations for councils' social work responsibilities announced in the recent local government settlement for 1999–2000 total £1.1 billion, an increase of £50 million on the current year.

From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many people in each council area are provided with residential accommodation under Care in the Community. [66637]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* The number of adults cared for in local authority residential homes and the number in private or voluntary homes who are wholly or partially funded by local authorities in Scotland at 31 March 1997, are provided for each local authority in the table.

Local authority	*Residents in LA establishments*	*Private/voluntary residents wholly or partially LA funded*	*Total*
Aberdeen	418	437	855
Aberdeenshire	344	335	679
Angus	189	121	310
Argyll & Bute	164	174	338
Clackmannanshire	69	26	95
Dumfries & Galloway	278	228	506
Dundee	399	84	483
East Ayrshire	122	130	252
East Dunbartonshire	42	36	78
East Lothian	145	131	276
East Renfrewshire	43	92	135
Edinburgh	669	623	1,292
Falkirk	189	187	376
Fife	419	269	688
Glasgow	1,160	978	2,138
Highland	346	416	762
Inverclyde	73	178	251
Midlothian	148	81	229
Moray	148	113	261
North Ayrshire	126	167	293
North Lanarkshire	418	305	723
Orkney Islands	68	9	77
Perth & Kinross	177	259	436
Renfrewshire	243	223	466
Scottish Borders	213	257	470
Shetland Islands	64	39	103
South Ayrshire	165	176	341
South Lanarkshire	437	179	616
Stirling	108	162	270
West Dunbartonshire	228	47	275
West Lothian	214	94	308
Western Isles	177	18	195
Scotland	8,003	6,574	14,577

From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what figures his Department uses to determine the economic charge per room which housing associations and other providers under the Care in the Community scheme have to charge to meet the registration standards set for staffing, food and accommodation and their loan charges. [66638]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* We do not calculate charges per room. Supported accommodation is only one of a large range of care options available to councils to meet their community care responsibilities. The distribution of funding—which is undertaken in consultation with COSLA—is not based on the cost of any one option.

From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

St. Patrick's Day Parades

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will collate and publish data from police authorities on *(a)* the number of towns in which St. Patrick's Day parades are held each year, *(b)* police estimates of the number of participants in parades of over 1,000 persons for each of the last 10 years and *(c)* the number of parades which raised public order concerns. [66962]

Mr. McLeish *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* The police have no record of any St. Patrick's Day parades taking place in Scotland.

There have been no parades involving more than 1,000 people in the Dumfries and Galloway, Fife, Grampian or Northern police force areas. The information in respect of the remaining areas is as follows:

Central Scotland: One annual parade, of greatly variable size.

Lothian and Borders: One annual parade averaging 1,000 participants.

Strathclyde: (Information is available for the last 3 years only).

1996—21 parades averaging 2,700 participants

1997—28 parades averaging 3,530 participants

1998—23 parades averaging 5,100 participants

Tayside: One parade in 1993 involving approximately 7,500 participants.

All large parades require to be effectively policed to ensure the safety of the participants involved and of the public. However, only the parade in Tayside gave rise to serious public order concerns.

From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Saughton Prison

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when the special segregation unit at Saughton prison was completed; how much it cost; how many prisoners it is designed to accommodate; how many staff will work there; when he expects it to be in operation; and if he will make a statement. [67497]

Mr. McLeish: The new Segregation Unit was completed in November 1998, at a cost of £1.3 million, excluding VAT. The Unit has been designed to hold a maximum of 14 prisoners. Staff on duty at any one time will comprise one Supervisor, 3 Residential Officers, and, when required, one Administrative Officer. The Unit will be brought into operation once current discussions with the Scottish Prison Officers' Association, about staffing levels for the establishment as a whole, have been satisfactorily concluded.

From 1 July 1999, prison service issues will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Housing Partnership Funding

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the local authorities which have bid for new housing partnership funding for the period 1999–2002, detailing for each authority *(a)* if the bid is a feasibility study of stock transfers, how many dwellings are covered by the study and *(b)* if the bid is for actual transfers of homes, how many dwellings the authority plans to transfer, if funding requirements are met in full. [67499]

Mr. Macdonald: All local authorities except Angus Council have submitted bids for New Housing Partnership funding for the period 1999–2002. Bids are at present being assessed by the New Housing Partnerships Advisory Group which will be making recommendations to Ministers. An announcement on the successful bids, including those involving feasibility work for councils considering the possibility of housing transfer, is expected around the end of February.

From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Scottish Office Documents

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the documents published by the Scottish Office since May 1997 indicating which were sent unsolicited *(a)* to all Scottish hon. Members and *(b)* to selected hon. Members. [67496]

Mr. Dewar: The Scottish Office produces a large number of publications of different kinds. A list of items published between May 1997 and January 1998 was placed in the House Library in February 1998. A further list of items published in the year to January 1999 will be placed in the Library as soon as possible.

Information about which publications were sent to hon. Members is not held centrally, and could be compiled only at disproportionate cost. In general, The Scottish Office seeks to ensure that key publications are brought to the attention of hon. Members by sending copies to the hon. Member for each Scottish constituency. In addition, Scottish Office publications are available on the Department's web site: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/.

Social Exclusion Projects

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the social exclusion projects currently in operation in Scotland indicating for each *(a)* the number of people benefiting, *(b)* the Government's financial contribution and *(c)* the total cost. [67498]

Mr. Macdonald: The Government are taking forward a wide range of programmes and projects to promote social inclusion in Scotland. Over the next three years, the Government will invest £48 million in the new Social Inclusion Partnerships; £49 million in the National Childcare Strategy; £26 million in New Community Schools; £49 million in Early Intervention schemes; £24 million in Alternatives to Exclusion from School; and an additional £278 million in New Housing Partnerships. The Government have also pledged around £350 million over the lifetime of this Parliament to support the New Deals in Scotland, another key element of the Government's programme to promote inclusion. The Government's programme to promote social inclusion in Scotland will be set out in detail in the context of its "social inclusion strategy", to be published shortly.

From 1 July 1999, action taken forward under the social inclusion strategy will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Education White Paper

Miss Begg: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he will publish the Government's Education White Paper; and if he will make a statement. [68124]

Mr. Dewar: I have today published our Education White Paper, entitled *Targeting Excellence: Modernising Scotland's Schools*. Copies have been sent to all Members with a Scottish constituency, and are also available in the Library of the House.

It sets out a radical programme for improvement and an approach to modernisation to achieve our objective of a world class schools system founded on excellence. At its centre is a focus on the needs of the individual child.

The programme for improvement incorporates a wide range of proposals in the early years, throughout the work of schools and to support children in learning outside the classroom. Key policies include a strategy on literacy and numeracy, the National Grid for Learning, involvement of parents and the piloting of New Community Schools.

Our approach to modernisation includes proposals on the teaching profession and organisation of schools to ensure that the framework within which schools and teachers operate empowers them to take responsibility for their own improvement. Many of these proposals are for further consideration and consultation.

From 1 July 1999 education will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament, and it will be for them to consider how they wish to take forward the proposals outlined in the paper.

WALES

National Assembly (EU Representation)

11. **Mr. Cash:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he plans to establish representation for the National Assembly in Brussels which is separate from UK representation; and if he will make a statement. [66280]

Mr. Michael: Wales will continue to be represented formally in Brussels by the Office of the United Kingdom Permanent Representative. However, it will be for the Assembly itself to decide whether it wishes to establish a local presence in Brussels.

Paediatric Heart Surgery

12. **Ms Julie Morgan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to develop paediatric heart surgery in Wales. [66281]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The University Hospital of Wales is currently engaged in discussions with the Royal College of Surgeons over the best arrangements for delivering cardiac services for children following the departure of a key surgeon. The formal link between Cardiff's paediatric cardiac unit and Birmingham Children's Hospital ensures that children who need treatment are receiving it. The setting up of the associated paediatric intensive care unit at UHW, for which the Department is providing additional funding, will help to maintain and develop a viable high quality clinical service for the children of Wales.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Employment (South Wales Valleys)

13. **Ann Clwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of employment trends in the south Wales valleys. [66282]

Mr. Michael: The Welsh Office will be publishing "A Statistical Focus on Wales: Valleys" on 24 February 1999. It will contain a significant amount of information on the labour market in the Valleys, compared with the rest of Wales.

Addressing the needs of the Valleys and West Wales is one of my main priorities as set out in "Pathway to Prosperity".

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Nurses and Midwives

14. **Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many *(a)* nurses and *(b)* midwives have undergone training in Wales in the current year. [66283]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: In Wales there were 2,300 nurses undertaking three year diploma or degree courses during 1998 and 63 nurses undertaking a four year degree course. Eighty four nurses have taken the 18 month post basic midwifery diploma course and 36 students are undertaking the three year direct entry midwifery diploma course. In addition 140 nurses were undertaking the Diploma in Community Health studies course.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

20. **Mr. Peter Atkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many whole-time equivalent nurses are currently employed in Wales. [66289]

Mr. Michael: The NHS in Wales reported that there were 23,691 whole time equivalent staff employed in the nursing, midwifery and health visiting group in September 1998.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

NHS Beds

15. **Mr. Win Griffiths:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to encourage the more effective use of beds in the NHS. [66284]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: It is important that all parts of the NHS operate effectively and efficiently. The decisions on trust reconfiguration will enable more effective use of facilities in co-operation with other organisations, and the work already underway on a Corporate Strategy for NHS Wales together with the performance framework set out in "Putting Patients First", will contribute to improved results.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Gwynedd County Council (Employment Policies)

16. **Mr. Sayeed:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the Welsh Language Board regarding the employment policies of Gwynedd county council. [66285]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: My right hon. Friend and I have held no such discussions with the Welsh Language Board.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

19. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received regarding employment discrimination against non-Welsh speakers by Gwynedd county council; and if he will make a statement. [66288]

Mr. Michael: I have not personally received any representations since coming to office. My Department has received one representation. The Welsh Office has no power to investigate or intervene in local authority recruitment matters. Accordingly, the correspondent was advised to bring any concerns he might have to the attention of Gwynedd Council's Monitoring Officer.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Livestock Industry

17. **Mr. Paterson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the prospects for the Welsh livestock industry. [66286]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The Welsh Office is working with the Welsh Development Agency and the industry to develop an Action Plan for the lamb and beef sectors which will be published in the Spring. This, together with the promotional work being done by organisations such as Welsh Lamb and Beef Promotions to reopen our European markets, will provide a basis for the Welsh livestock industry to strengthen its competitiveness and adapt to meet the challenges facing it.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Education Funding

18. **Mr. Touhig:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the funding for education in Wales for 1999–2000. [66287]

Mr. Michael: I have announced an extra £117 million spending for education in 1999–2000. The main elements are £70 million in the local government revenue settlement for education; an additional £23.5 million for further education; and an additional £38.2 million for higher education. Further details will be announced shortly.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

National Assembly

21. **Caroline Flint:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has in respect of the working hours of the Welsh Assembly and the provision of child care to support Welsh Assembly members and staff with children under 14 years of age. [66290]

Mr. Michael: It is for the Assembly itself to determine its working hours and its child care policy, having regard to the recommendations of the National Assembly Advisory Group (NAAG).

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

22. **Mr. Blunt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much is planned to be spent on making ready a debating chamber for the National Assembly in Crickhowell House. [66291]

Mr. Michael: The estimated cost for providing a temporary chamber is £1 million.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

24. **Dr. Julian Lewis:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what changes he is proposing for ministerial responsibilities within his Department consequent upon the establishment of the National Assembly. [66293]

Mr. Michael: This is a matter for consideration once the Assembly is established.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement about how he proposes to handle appointments to public bodies which are due to be considered in the run-up to, and during the establishment of, the National Assembly for Wales. [68344]

Mr. Michael: In considering appointments which fall due in this period I have been mindful of the need to allow the Assembly to take over its responsibilities quickly and in an orderly way in relation to those public bodies for which it will be responsible. It has been necessary to give early consideration to such appointments because of the time required for the appointments process.

I have now had the opportunity of considering appointments in detail and, generally, I propose to extend existing appointments for up to 12 months to allow the Assembly time to introduce its own policy and procedures. This is not suitable for all appointments and there is a need for some full term re-appointments and new appointments.

Different public bodies have varying circumstances and each one has had to be considered individually. The factors which have been taken into account in each case have been the potential impact on the body concerned of short term extensions to existing appointments, the need for long term stability and continuity; the number of appointments becoming vacant at any one time; the need to retain specialist knowledge or a balance of skills on the body concerned; past difficulties in recruiting members; and the number of appointments held by candidates. In all cases, I have had full regard to the guidance and advice of the Commissioner for Public Appointments and I shall continue to do so.

Decisions have now been taken on most of the appointments concerned and these will be announced in the coming weeks.

EU Structural Funds

23. **Mr. Gareth Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement about reform of European structural funds in relation to Wales. [66292]

Mr. Michael: It is important that reform of the Structural Funds provides an outcome that is affordable, durable and fair and my Department is fully involved in discussions at the UK level and in Brussels to secure an outcome consistent with these principles. For Wales this should ensure that Structural Funds support is targeted at the most needy areas of the country and it remains very likely that West Wales and the Valleys will benefit from an Objective 1 programme starting next year.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Road Safety, Croesyceiliog

25. **Mr. Edwards:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the danger to pedestrians crossing the A4042 at the pedestrian crossing at Croesyceiliog. [66294]

Mr. Hain: Pedestrian safety is of paramount importance to the Welsh Office. Since an at-grade crossing place was provided in late 1987, no reported injury accidents involving pedestrians have occurred at this point, and the situation is constantly monitored.

During the design of the Llantarnam Bypass scheme and the subsequent Public Inquiry careful consideration was given to the issue of pedestrian safety.

Additional signing was provided, advising pedestrians and motorists of the crossing point and to help encourage pedestrian use of the upgraded subway.

Officials have recently agreed to meet with local residents for a discussion of their concerns in this matter.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

NHS Vacancies

26. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many vacancies for *(a)* nurses, *(b)* doctors and *(c)* midwives there are in the NHS in Wales. [66295]

Mr. Michael: Although this information is not collected centrally we do have some information regarding nurses and midwives but not doctors. The workforce plans produced by NHS Trusts identified at 30 September 1997, 442 vacancies for registered nurses in Wales out of 11,243 staff in post; 30 vacancies for community nurses out of a total 2,634 staff in post; and 24 vacancies for widwives out of 1,284 staff in post. The 1998 data will be available in May 1999. A nurse executive survey undertaken in June 1998, suggested that nursing vacancies had risen to 597.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Welsh Development Agency

27. **Mr. Öpik:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what measures he is taking to ensure that the Welsh Development Agency supports indigenous Welsh businesses as fully as it supports foreign investors. [66415]

Mr. Michael: Yesterday, on 26 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *172*, in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Ms Lawrence), I announced that I had written to the Chairman of the Welsh Development Agency setting out Strategic Guidance for the period to March 2000. A copy of this letter is available in the Library of the House. I made it clear that the Agency, in addition to attracting foreign direct investment, must concentrate on supporting new businesses and encouraging small businesses to grow in all parts of Wales.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Schools (Funding)

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the funding for schools in Wales for 1999–2000. [66279]

Mr. Hain: We have allocated an additional £70 million for education in 1999–2000 and I have made it clear that the bulk of this money should go into delegated school budgets to support teachers and promote higher standards in the classroom.

An extra £13 million for capital works at local authority schools is available in 1999–2000. This on top of capital provision for local authorities through Basic Credit Approvals (BCAs). The notional provision for education BCAs is £42.939m.

Further announcements covering the Grants for Education Support and Training (GEST) programme and for infant class size reduction will be made shortly.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Quangos

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many quango posts in Wales have become vacant since May 1997; in which newspapers advertisements for these posts have been published; and which of these posts were filled without having been publicly advertised. [67272]

Mr. Michael: Seventy one Public Appointment vacancies in NDPBs in Wales have arisen. Of these;

Sixty vacancies have been advertised in local and national press.

Three vacancies were not filled due to merger or abolition of the body or transfer of powers, these being one member position on the Welsh Health Common Services Agency, one member position on the Health Promotion Authority for Wales and one member position on the Development Board for Rural Wales.

One member vacancy on the Ancient Monuments Board was not advertised as the appointment is made from a nominated source as laid down in statute.

Two member vacancies on the Tai Cymru Board falling in May 1997 were not advertised because the appointments process began under the previous administration. The board has now ceased to exist.

The appointments process has yet to begin for the five remaining vacancies. These are one member position on the Court and Council of the Museum and Galleries of Wales, one member position on the Arts Council for Wales, one member position on the Sports Council for Wales, one member position on the Gwent Agriculture Wages Committee and one member position on the Gwynedd Agriculture Wages Committee.

The local and national press used to advertise these vacancies in varying combinations were: the *Western Mail*, the *Liverpool Daily Post*, *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Times Educational Supplement*, *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, *The Sunday Times*, "Golwg", "Y Cymro", *Water Bulletin* and the *Library Association Record*.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Teacher Training

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is the estimated cost, in each of the next three financial years, of the recently announced inducement

payments for students prepared to undertake teacher training courses; if these payments are to be made to students regardless of whether they are undertaking such courses in Wales or elsewhere; and if such grants will be made by his Department to students from outside Wales wishing to undertake such courses at colleges in Wales. [67104]

Mr. Hain: Payments of the bursaries for mathematics and science students will be made to those who undertake a PGCE course in mathematics or science in Wales, starting in September 1999. It will be paid as £2,500 during the PGCE course, and £2,500 to trainees entering the teaching profession. The full payment of the bursary will therefore be conditional on those students subsequently entering teaching within those subjects.

It is estimated that based on current intake targets the scheme in Wales could cost £775,000 per annum in 1999–2000 and the following two financial years. Payments will be made to all students undertaking courses in Wales; similarly, payments will be made by the Department for Education and Employment to all students undertaking courses in England. The precise mechanism for making the payments will be finalised in the next few months.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Government Residential Property

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how his Department has performed against last year's targets for reducing empty Government residential property; and what new targets have been set for 1998–99. [68345]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: I am pleased to announce that the Welsh Office was largely successful in meeting the target set for disposal of empty government homes in 1997–98.

We are continuing to set challenging targets for disposal or bringing back into use those properties which become empty and hope to be able to maintain our success over the coming year.

Details of achievements against targets for 1997–98 and new targets for 1998–99 are set as follows.

Empty government residential property

	Number
Welsh Office achievements 1997–98	
Total stock 1 April 1997	114
Empty stock 1 April 1997	33
1997–98 Target for disposal or bringing back into use	33
Achievement against target	28
Welsh Office targets 1998–99	
Total stock 1 April 1998	136
Empty stock 1 April 1998	[1]17
Target for disposal or bringing back into use	9

[1] Includes 8 properties vandalised/derelict held for future road schemes and considered unsuitable for bringing back into use

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Concessionary Travel (Blind and Visually Impaired)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will introduce regulations to require local authorities in Wales to provide a mandatory concessionary travel scheme for blind and visually impaired people. [67448]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Under the Transport Act 1985 local authorities may provide travel concessions for people who are blind or partially sighted, although there is no requirement to do so. My priority with concessionary fares is to ensure that from April all authorities provide schemes for pensioners which meet the minimum standard of a £5 bus pass and half-fares, and then to move to free bus travel for pensioners over the next two to three years. This will of course benefit many blind and visually impaired people.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Tir Gofal Agri-environmental Scheme

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received since the meeting of the Welsh Grand Committee on 16 December 1998 concerning the Tir Gofal agri-environmental scheme. [66269]

Mr. Michael: No representations have been received about Tir Gofal since the Welsh Grand Committee met on 16 December 1998.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Environmental Projects

Mrs. Betty Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the funding of projects to improve the environment of Wales for 1999–2000. [66277]

Mr. Michael: I have announced that I will be making provision of £12.4 million for Tir Gofal over the next three years. Continuing support will be available from the Environment Wales grant scheme, CCW and others such as the WDA.

I will be making an announcement shortly about the £3 million I have earmarked for an Environment Development Fund. I thank my hon. Friend for her interest.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Aerosol Sprays

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what mechanisms exist to assess the toxicity of, and to approve the use of, the ingredients of aerosol spray products used in the domestic environment. [67910]

Dr. Howells: A number of chemicals are banned from use in consumer products by Directives agreed by all European Union Member States. Chemicals prohibited under the 'Classification, Packaging And Labelling Dangerous Substances Directive 67/548/EEC' and the

'Restrictions On the Marketing And Use Of Certain Dangerous Substances And Preparations Directive 76/769/EEC', are not available for use by aerosol, or other manufacturers. Dangerous chemicals are regularly reviewed under these Directives. The safety of chemicals not prohibited under these Directives and intended for use in domestic products, including aerosols, is regulated by the Chemicals (Hazard Information And Packaging For Supply) Regulations 1994 as amended.

These Regulations require, amongst other things, that manufacturers must assess a chemical product for its health effects (toxicity, irritancy etc.). If dangerous the product must then be labelled with a warning symbol and with phrases indicating the dangers. The particular chemical(s) which cause the product to be classified must also be named on the label. The Regulations also require that all potentially dangerous chemicals supplied to the public must be in packaging which is properly labelled and contains warnings about the potential hazards and giving brief advice on suitable precautions.

Casalee

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what investigations Her Majesty's Government have carried out into the affairs of Casalee; [65127]

(2) what dealings representatives of Her Majesty's Government have had with Casalee. [65128]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* As far as the DTI is concerned, a search of the most potentially relevant sources of information has produced no evidence of any DTI dealings with—or investigations into the affairs of Casalee.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the role of Her Majesty's Government official was in *(a)* sponsoring and *(b)* participating in discussions between Mr. John Bredenkamp and Brigadier Julius in connection with the affairs of (i) Allivane and (ii) Casalee. [65129]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* As far as the DTI is concerned, a search of the most potentially relevant sources of information has produced no evidence of any role played by DTI officials in these matters.

Stephen Kock

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) in what role Mr. Stephen Kock represented Her Majesty's Government in his dealings with Mr. Gerald Bull and the Space Research Corporation; [65149]

(2) in what role Mr. Stephen Kock represented Her Majesty's Government when advising Societé Generale de Belge, GECHEM and Warburgs during the negotiations by Astra to purchase PRB. [65150]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* As far as the DTI is concerned, I am not aware that Mr. Kock has ever represented the Department.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which civil servants in his Department met Mr. Stephen Kock to discuss matters relating to defence contracts with Malaysia in the period from January 1985 to the end of December 1988. [65138]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* A search of the most potentially relevant sources of information has produced no evidence of any such meetings between DTI officials and Mr. Kock.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions took place between his Department's officials and representatives of the Scott inquiry on the advisability of calling upon Mr. Stephen Kock to give evidence to that inquiry *(a)* before, *(b)* during and *(c)* after the inquiry. [65131]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* All issues relating to whom to call to give evidence to the Scott inquiry were solely a matter for Sir Richard Scott and his inquiry team.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions have taken place since 1992 between representatives of Her Majesty's Government and Mr. Stephen Kock over the dealings of Messrs Allivane in defence contracting between 1989 and 1992. [65124]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* As far as the DTI is concerned, a search of the potentially most relevant sources of information has produced no evidence of any DTI involvement in such discussions.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what role was played by his Department in sponsoring dealings in defence matters between Mr. Stephen Kock and Sir Thomas Legg. [65142]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* I am not aware of any role played by the DTI in relation to dealings in defence matters between Mr. Stephen Kock and Sir Thomas Legg.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which Government-sponsored delegations to Russia between 1990 and 1995 included Mr. Stephen Kock. [65157]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* I am not aware of any Government-sponsored delegations to Russia between 1990 and 1995 which included Mr. Kock.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what role has been played by Mr. Stephen Kock in conjunction with representatives of Her Majesty's Government in arranging, promoting or negotiating arms supply to China. [65139]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* As far as the DTI is concerned, a search of the most potentially relevant sources of information has produced no evidence of any collaboration between Mr. Stephen Kock and the DTI in arranging, promoting or negotiating arms supply to China.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry in what role Mr. Stephen Kock represented Her Majesty's Government when he negotiated credit for Iraq. [65151]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* Mr. Kock did not represent the Export Credits Guarantee Department when credit facilities were negotiated for Iraq.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what role was played by his Department in sponsoring dealings on defence contracting matters between Mr. Stephen Kock, Mr. Roy Barber and Mr. Dennis Robertson of Stoy Hayward. [65141]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* A search of the most potentially relevant sources of information has produced no evidence of a role played by the DTI in any such matters.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what consideration was made by his Department's inspectors of the advisability of bringing legal proceedings against Mr. Stephen Kock as a director of Astra. [65132]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The Companies Act inspectors were appointed to investigate and report on the affairs of Astra and in particular the circumstances surrounding the acquisition of a Belgian company, PRB. However, when asked for their views on directors disqualification, the inspectors did not identify Stephen Kock as a candidate for such proceedings.

Companies House

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is his estimate of the increased income which will accrue to Companies House in 1999–2000 as a result of proposed changes to the level of fees to take effect on 1 March 1999. [67913]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* The increased income expected in 1999–2000 as a result of proposed changes to fees from 1 March 1999 is approximately £2 million. This figure includes both the direct effect of changed fees and the forecast impact on sales revenue as volumes adjust to changed fees and other market-place parameters.

End-of-life Vehicles

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what is his Department's current estimate of the cost of implementation of the draft EC Directive on end-of-life vehicles; [67341]

(2) if he will publish the results of the consultation exercise by his Department to assess the implications of the draft EC Directive on end-of-life vehicles. [67342]

Dr. Howells: The Government estimate that the cost of implementing this Directive will be £312 million per annum in 2005 and £388 million per annum in 2015. My Department submitted an Explanatory Memorandum and Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) on the Directive to the European Scrutiny Committee in December 1998, and the RIA was then updated in January 1999. These documents summarise the results of our consultation exercise and give further details on the costs and benefits of this Directive. Copies of the Explanatory Memorandum and the RIA are available from the Vote Office, and copies of the updated RIA have been placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the effect of the End of Vehicle Life directive on vintage and classic cars; what is his Department's current cost compliance assessment; what voting arrangements apply to the directive; and if he will make a statement. [67392]

Dr. Howells: Vintage and classic vehicles will only be affected by this Directive if they become 'waste' as defined under existing legislation—in other words, when the owners have decided to discard them. My Department submitted an Explanatory Memorandum and Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) on this Directive to the European Scrutiny Committee in December 1998, and the RIA was then updated in January 1999. Copies of the Explanatory Memorandum and RIA are available from the Vote Office, and copies of the updated RIA have been placed in the Libraries of the House. This Directive is a qualified majority voting Directive made under Article 130s(1) of the Treaty of Rome. It has still to be finalised and decisions on the Council's Common Position are not expected until the next Environment Council in March.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he plans to implement the European Union Directive on End-of-Life Vehicles; and if he will make a statement. [67154]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* This Directive has still to be finalised. Decisions on the Council's Common Position will not be taken until the next Environment Council in March, and the Directive is not presently expected to come into force until the year 2000. We would then envisage that Member States would be given an appropriate period in which to implement the Directive.

Industrial Tribunals

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what percentage of *(a)* chairmen and *(b)* wing members of industrial tribunals are women. [67742]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Employment Rights (Dispute Resolution) Act 1998 renamed industrial tribunals as employment tribunals from 1 August 1998.

The current percentage of women who are *(a)* employment tribunal chairmen (including the Presidents) is 15.4 per cent. and *(b)* lay members is 29.5 per cent.

British Aviation

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the future of British aviation. [66930]

Mr. Battle: The Prime Minister's statement with the Heads of Government of France and Germany of December 1997 made it clear that there is an urgent need to restructure the aerospace and defence industries in Europe, if our companies are to continue to compete successfully in world markets. That remains the case. However, as Ministers have made clear, it is for industry to make specific restructuring proposals.

Any proposed merger would be considered by the relevant competition authorities. Each case would be considered on its own merits.

Tourism

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what percentage of loans under the Small Firms Loan Guarantee Scheme have been in the leisure, hospitality and tourism sectors; and what is the total value of such loans. [67400]

Mr. Wills: Loans under the Small Firms Loan Guarantee Scheme are recorded under the Central Statistical Office's Standard Industrial Classification of economic activities. Leisure, hospitality and tourism are not recognised as separate sectors within this classification.

Businesses in these areas are distributed within a range of industrial sectors and a manual collection of the data would incur disproportionate costs.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the percentage of electrical goods currently on sale in the United Kingdom which are not millennium compliant; what steps he is taking to ensure that goods which are not millennium compliant are clearly marked as such; and if he will make a statement. [66645]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 20 January 1999]:* Only a small percentage of electrical goods on sale in the United Kingdom depend on date changes to function correctly. The 'Millennium Bug Homecheck!' brochure available from Action 2000 and major high street retailers contains a list of domestic electrical and transport equipment not affected by the date change and a list of those which are, mainly home computers, video recorders, burglar alarms, fax machines, digital cameras, answerphones, camcorders, videophones and watches. The Government have sought to make sure that suppliers of electrical goods are fully aware of their responsibilities for ensuring compliance of any such goods on sale that are affected by the date change. Many of the large retailers have tested their electrical goods and given written guarantees that they are millennium compliant.

The application of false or misleading statements to products is a criminal offence under the Trade Descriptions Act 1968. Any goods falsely described as millennium compliant would be subject to controls which already exist.

Regional Aid

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will give details of the proportion of EU structural funding proposed for rural areas under the European guidelines on regional aid published in March 1998. [66142]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The Commission's draft regulation for the Structural and Cohesion Funds for post 1999 propose that rural areas could be eligible for funding under Objectives 1, 2 and 3. There is also a proposal for a Community Initiative for rural development. There are no details of proportions of funding available to rural or any other areas at a national level.

The Guidelines on Regional Aid, published by the Commission in March 1998, cover the review of Assisted Areas which is the subject of a separate exercise. No decisions have been yet made on areas which might be eligible after 1 January 2000.

Unsolicited Faxes

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he plans to take to regulate the unsolicited sending of facsimile messages. [67456]

Mr. Wills: Further to my predecessor's written answer on 16 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *434*, the Government laid the Telecommunications (Data Protection and Privacy) (Direct Marketing) Regulations 1998 before Parliament on 17 December 1998. These Regulations will come into force on 1 May 1999.

The Regulations will prohibit the sending of unsolicited direct marketing faxes to private individuals and sole traders in the UK, as well as to partnerships in England and Wales. The Regulations also establish an "opt-out" scheme for corporate subscribers who do not wish to receive such faxes. The Office of Telecommunications (OFTEL) is responsible for setting up the opt-out scheme. Details of how to register will be publicised in due course.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Al Shifa Factory, Khartoum

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what response Her Majesty's Government gave to the letter of the Sudanese Minister of Foreign Affairs of 27 October 1998 asking for clarification of his comments, made on 23 October, to the effect that Her Majesty's Government had independent evidence that the Al Shifa factory in Khartoum was making chemical or biological weapons before the United States air strike. [67623]

Mr. Fatchett: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary did not make the comments to which my hon. Friend refers.

Departmental Papers (Access for Visually Impaired)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has for departmental *(a)* White and *(b)* Green Papers to be made available on floppy disk format in a form which facilitates access for the visually impaired. [67839]

Mr. Fatchett: Under current publishing arrangements FCO would make any White or Green papers available on its Web site—www.fco.gov.uk. Standard Web browsing software allows documents to be viewed online in large fonts, or downloaded for use in specialised computer systems for the visually impaired. There are no plans to supplement this by floppy disk distribution.

Departmental Publications

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list by title the publications produced by his Department since 1 February 1998. [67385]

Mr. Fatchett: A list of departmental publications from February to December 1998 has been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Departmental Recruits (Human Rights Course)

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the *(a)* instructors, *(b)* location and *(c)* subjects concerned in the one day human rights course for new Foreign Office recruits. [67368]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Human rights training courses are held in the FCO and are organised by the Human Rights Policy Department. They cover international law and institutions, UK policy, projects and case studies, as well as presentations by NGOs. In human rights training courses over the last six months, presentations have been given by Amnesty International; Save the Children Fund; Article 19; Penal Reform International; Medical Foundation for the Victims of Torture; and Minority Rights Group.

Joint Consultative Committee

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with Liberal Democrat Members using the Joint Consultative Committee mechanism. [67056]

Mr. Robin Cook *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* I have attended several meetings of the Joint Consultative Committee since its inception.

I have also had one bilateral meeting with the Liberal Democrat spokesman on foreign affairs and defence.

Biological Weapons Convention

Ms McCafferty: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how the Government will promote proposals for a strengthened Biological Weapons Convention by the year 2000 at the forthcoming negotiations in Geneva. [67158]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Strengthening the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) is a key Government objective in the field of arms control. The UK is playing a leading role in the negotiations on a legally-binding Protocol where we are chairing the sessions on compliance measures. This section will be at the heart of the future verification regime. With a total of 16 weeks of negotiations in 1999, the UK will be working closely with its EU partners, and all other countries actively seeking completion of a Protocol during 2000. Consistent with the importance we attach to this work, the UK has offered to host the Signing Ceremony of the Protocol in London.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many times he or his junior ministers have paid official visits to *(a)* the Czech Republic, *(b)* Poland, *(c)* Hungary, *(d)* Slovenia, *(e)* Estonia and *(f)* Cyprus since May 1997; and what was the purpose of each visit. [67699]

Ms Quin: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary undertook visits to the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary in November 1997 and to Slovenia in November 1998.

My predecessor as Minister of State for Europe, my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson), also undertook the following visits:

Slovenia—October 1997

Estonia—November 1997

Poland—April 1998

Czech Republic—April 1998.

The purpose of each visit was to discuss matters of bilateral interest.

No FCO Ministerial visits have been made to Cyprus since 1 May 1997.

European Young Consumer Competition

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the running of the fifth European Young Consumer Competition, on the Single Currency, in the United Kingdom. [67463]

Dr. Howells: I have been asked to reply.

I fully support the competition's objective of encouraging young people to become more enlightened consumers and communicators so that they can take full advantage of the benefits of the Single Market. That said, involvement in the competition is a matter for individual schools and teachers to consider.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Income Support

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate on the basis of current policy how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women, aged (i) 65 to 69, (ii) 70 to 79 and (iii) 80 years or above in 2050, will receive income support by that date. [65425]

Angela Eagle: The information requested is not available. Such information as is available is as follows.

Projections forward to the year 2050 are subject to a high degree of uncertainty, given the number of assumptions that need to be made in making these estimates. Estimates of the number of pensioners receiving Income Support in 2050 have been made by extrapolating results from the PENSIM model. These estimates can only give a broad indication of the likely order of magnitude of figures so far into the future, and are heavily rounded. Estimates of sub-groups of this caseload are not available.

On the basis of existing policies, estimates suggest that 1 in 3 (3.5 million) pensioners in 2050 could rely on Income Support. Even if no behavioural changes are assumed, our proposals in our new insurance contract for pensions will mean that these estimates are reduced to approximately 1 in 4 (2.5 million) pensioners receiving income from the Minimum Income Guarantee in 2050, and a lower proportion in years after 2050.

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how much it would cost to raise the upper threshold of income support for those in residential or nursing care to £40,000 with a lower limit of *(a)* £10,000, *(b)* £20,000, *(c)* £30,000 and *(d)* no lower limit; [67242]

(2) how much it would cost to raise the upper threshold of income support for those in residential or nursing care to £50,000 with a lower limit of *(a)* £10,000, *(b)* £20,000, *(c)* £30,000, *(d)* £40,000 and *(e)* no lower limit; [67243]

(3) how much it would cost to raise the upper threshold of income support for those in residential or nursing care to £60,000 with a lower limit of *(a)* £10,000, *(b)* £20,000, *(c)* £30,000, *(d)* £40,000, *(e)* £50,000 and *(f)* no lower limit; [67244]

(4) how much it would cost to raise the upper threshold of income support for those in residential or nursing care to £70,000 with a lower limit of *(a)* £10,000, *(b)* £20,000, *(c)* £30,000, *(d)* £40,000, *(e)* £50,000, *(f)* £60,000 and *(g)* no lower limit. [67245]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Estimated costs to income support of changes to the capital limits for residential care

£ million

	Upper limit £40k	*Upper limit £50k*	*Upper limit £60k*	*Upper limit £70k*
Lower limit—£10k	25	25	25	25
Lower limit—£20k	50	50	75	75
Lower limit—£30k	50	75	100	100
Lower limit—£40k	—	100	125	125
Lower limit—£50k	—	—	150	175
Lower limit—£60k	—	—	—	200
Lower limit—none	75	125	175	200

Notes:

1. The estimates of the costs to income support of raising the capital limits for residential care should be regarded as orders of magnitude only. They are for Great Britain at 1997–98 prices, rounded to the nearest £25 million. The analysis uses information from the 1996–97 Family Resources Survey on the income and assets of single very elderly people as a proxy for information on the income and assets of residents.
2. The estimates relate to the impact on income support expenditure only—not to any linked changes that might occur to capital limits for local support in residential care.
3. If they were matched in this way, the majority of the costs of raising the capital limits for residential care would fall to local authority social services rather than income support and have significant implications for local authority charging.
4. A minority of the privately funded residents who float on to income support would be eligible for the higher preserved rights rates, by virtue of admission before April 1993.
5. The estimates assume for illustrative purposes that one in eight would receive the higher rates of income support. In practice the proportion would depend on the date of implementation of the raised capital limits.

Severe Disablement Allowance

Mr. Frank Cook: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what provisions are to be made to ensure that recipients of the proposed higher level of severe disablement allowance will not be worse off as a result of paying non-dependent deductions as a consequence of losing their entitlement to income support. [66969]

Mr. Bayley: At present people severely disabled from birth or at an early age who are unable to work cannot earn the right to Incapacity Benefit. Under the proposals for reform of Severe Disablement Allowance, set out in the Consultation Paper "Support for Disabled People", people who become disabled early in life and claim benefit before the age of 20 will be entitled to Incapacity Benefit without having to satisfy the contribution conditions.

Where a person who is claiming Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit, Income Support Mortgage Interest or Jobseeker's Allowance Mortgage Interest has a non-dependent adult living in their household, a deduction is normally made from their relevant benefit in respect of that non-dependant to reflect a reasonable contribution towards household costs. These deductions are made at standard rates according to the non-dependant's age and circumstances. No special provisions apply to non-dependants who are in receipt of Incapacity Benefit. It is, of course, for the individuals concerned to decide how much, if anything, a non-dependant actually contributes.

People who become entitled to Incapacity Benefit under the new proposals will not be worse off as a result of paying an amount equivalent to non-dependent deductions as a consequence of losing their entitlement to Income Support.

As an example:

A single man aged 19 with severe learning difficulties lives with his parents who are claiming Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. As he currently receives Severe Disablement Allowance and Income Support of £61.30 a week no non-dependent deduction is made from his parents' Housing Benefit. Under our new proposals, he will receive Incapacity Benefit of £78.30 a week (at current rates) after a year on benefit which is £17.00 a week more than he currently gets. His parents will have a non-dependent deduction of £7.00 a week made from their Housing Benefit and a further deduction of £2.00 a week from their Council Tax Benefit. In this particular example, even if the young person contributes £9.00 a week towards his parents' household expenses he will still be better off by £8.00 a week.

Mr. Frank Cook: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate how much of the annual cost of implementing the proposed changes to severe disablement allowance will be offset as a result of taking claimants out of income support in respect of *(a)* non-dependent deductions for claimants living with recipients of housing benefit, council tax benefit or housing costs allowance *(b)* claimants no longer receiving free prescriptions, dental or optical services and *(c)* claimants no longer being able to access Social Fund community care grants. [66997]

Mr. Bayley: The information on which to base an estimate is not available.

Industrial Injury Benefit

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to extend industrial injury benefit to the self-employed; and if he will make a statement. [67122]

Mr. Bayley: There are no current plans to extend Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit to the self-employed. I refer the hon. Member to the written answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis) on 20 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *474*.

Pensioners

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate is provided by his Department's Family Resources Survey of the number of non-taxpaying pensioners who have some dividend income and who have capital in excess of £8,000. [67001]

Mr. Timms: The number of non-taxpaying pensioner benefit units who have some dividend income and capital in excess of £8,000 for 1998–99 is 240,000.

Notes:

1. The estimate is rounded to the nearest 10,000 pensioner benefit units, although it is not necessarily accurate to that degree.

2. The estimate should be treated with caution since taxpaying status is not directly measured by the Family Resources Survey, but has been modelled to the 1998–99 tax system based on reported income, and uprated to 1998–99 levels.

3. Pensioner benefit units are defined as single people over State pension age (men aged 65 and over, women aged 60 and over) and couples (married or cohabiting) where at least one partner is above State pension age.

4. Non-taxpaying pensioner benefit units are defined as those where no individual in the benefit unit is liable to tax.

5. Dividend income is defined as dividends or interest received from stocks, shares, bonds, debentures, other securities, unit trusts, investment trusts, Personal Equity Plans (PEPs) and government gilt-edged stock.

Source:

Family Resources Survey 1995–96.

Benefits

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proportion and what amount of the total welfare benefit bill for the past five years has been paid as *(a)* contributory and *(b)* non-contributory benefit. [67732]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the tables.

Social Security benefits expenditure

£ billion

Year	*Contributory benefits*	*Non-contributory benefits*	*Total benefits expenditure*
1993–94	39.5	42.9	82.4
1994–95	39.8	45.0	84.8
1995–96	40.7	48.1	88.8
1996–97	42.2	50.1	92.3
1997–98	43.2	50.5	93.7

Contributory and non-contributory benefits as a percentage of Social Security

Percentage

Year	*Contributory benefits*	*Non contributory*
1993–94	48.0	52.0
1994–95	46.9	53.1
1995–96	45.9	54.1
1996–97	45.7	54.3
1997–98	46.1	53.9

Notes:

1. The figures for 1997–98 are consistent with those published in the Pre-Budget Report of November 1998. Figures for the earlier years are derived from the Departmental Report 1998 (Cm 3913).

2. Social Security Benefits expenditure includes additional local authority expenditure on Housing, Community Charge and Council Tax Benefits.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what is the total value of moneys collected from absent parents contributions to maintenance from prescribed social security benefits which have been retained by the Child Support Agency to cover the cost of assessment and collection fees in each year since the Child Support Agency was established; [66479]

(2) what is the average time taken to recognise failure by a Child Support Agency enforcement officer to obtain payment of assessment from an absent parent and to issue court proceedings to recover outstanding arrears and establish regular payments. [66480]

Angela Eagle: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Mrs. Faith Boardman. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Mrs. Faith Boardman to Mr. Roy Beggs, dated 26 January 1999:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Questions to the Secretary of State for Social Security about the collection of fees and enforcement in relation to child support.

As there are elements of child support administration which cross the boundaries between the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency and the Great British Child Support Agency I have consulted with Mr. Gerry Keenan, the Chief Executive for the Child Support Agency (NI) and provided you with information on both Agencies. I am not able to provide all of the information in the precise format that you have requested, but have provided as much as is available.

The Child Support Agency (GB) is divided into 6 front line Business Units; an application to maintenance is dealt with by the Business Unit dealing with the geographical area in which the parent with care lives. Where a parent with care resides in Northern Ireland the case is dealt with by the Child Support Agency (NI). Where the parent with care lives in Northern Ireland and the non-resident parent lives in Great Britain the case may be referred to one of the mainland Business Units to carry out a face to face interview or to take enforcement action.

The Agencies charged fees until April 1995 when following a legislative change the charging of fees was suspended. Clients are liable to pay fees charged between April 1993 and April 1995 and they continue to be collected.

Fees were charged for both the assessment and collection services, chargeable to both the non-resident parent and the parent with care. Various categories of non-resident parents and parents with care were exempt from the payment of fees.

Contributions to maintenance are only collected from Income Support and Job Seekers Allowance (Income Based—introduced in October 1996); non-resident parents in receipt of Income Support were exempt from paying fees therefore neither the Child Support Agency (GB) or the Child Support Agency (NI) retain contributions to maintenance to cover the cost of fees.

Where arrears of maintenance arise, the Agencies take a variety of actions to secure payments. If the non-resident parent cannot pay the full amount straightaway, we try to reach an agreement with them to pay the arrears in instalments, which is added to their weekly maintenance assessment amount.

If a non-resident parent does not pay the agreed amount at the right time an Arrears Notice is sent; we will also try to contact the non-resident parent by telephone. If we reach an agreement, we would not ask the non-resident parent to pay more than 33% of their net income for child maintenance and arrears as long as they keep to the agreement. If a non-resident parent does not make or keep an agreement we can take up to 40% of their net income; if the non-resident parent is employed we will consider imposing a Deduction from Earnings Order. When a Deduction from Earnings Order is not suitable, for example where the non-resident parent is self employed and all voluntary methods have failed we then

consider legal action through the courts to secure payments of child maintenance. Very often the threat of such action is enough to ensure compliance.

Throughout the debt management and enforcement process, non-resident parents are given every opportunity to make a voluntary arrangement to pay off their child maintenance debt. The majority do agree to make an arrangement and only in a very small minority of cases is legal action actually taken.

The time taken between a breakdown in maintenance payments and taking legal proceedings is not measured. During 1997/98, the number of cases that were referred to Child Support Agency (GB) enforcement teams for litigation action was 17,833; it was only necessary to apply for 2,498 liability orders of which 1,353 were granted. In the first 9 months of this year the corresponding figures are 8,265, 2,911 and 1,424 respectively.

The Child Support Agency (GB) measures its performance in securing maintenance against the target set by the Secretary of State; the target during 1997/98 was for £500 million of child maintenance to be collected or arranged for direct payment from the non-resident parent to the parent with care. The total achieved was £541 million—the portion that was collected by the Agency was £344 million.

The Child Support Agency (NI) measures its performance in securing maintenance against the target set by the Minister for Northern Ireland; the target during 1997/98 was for £11.2 million of child maintenance to be collected or arranged for direct payment from the non-resident parent to the parent with care. The total achieved was £12.3 million—the portion that was collected by the Agency was £7.6 million.

I hope this is helpful.

Back to Work Bonus

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if there is a target time limit for the payment of the Back to Work Bonus. [66824]

Angela Eagle: The administration of the Back To Work Bonus is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency, Peter Mathison. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Miss Geraldine Smith, dated 26 January 1999:

I am replying to your recent Parliamentary Question asking if there is a target time limit for the payment of the Back To Work Bonus (BTWB).

The Back To Work Bonus scheme was implemented by the Benefits Agency with the introduction of Jobseeker's Allowance. There is an internal target relating to the timing of the payment of the BTWB. We aim to pay 65 per cent. of claims in 2 days and 95 per cent. in 10 days. However the emphasis is on the accuracy of payments.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

TREASURY

Local Deprivation Indicators

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which measures of local deprivation his Department and its agencies use in considering allocation of funds to local projects. [66722]

Mr. Milburn: The Departments for which the Chancellor is responsible are not in general involved in allocating funds to local projects.

Exceptions to this are the funds allocated through the Invest to Save Budget and the Capital Modernisation Fund, announced in the Comprehensive Spending Review. These funds are allocated by the Treasury on a competitive basis to projects proposed by departments, taking account of a range of published criteria. In addition, the Treasury Private Finance Initiative (PFI) Taskforce has a leading role in the Project Review Group that allocates support for local authority PFI projects.

In each case, local deprivation is taken into account for appropriate types of project, but no specific measure of local deprivation is used.

Building Societies

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his Department's responsibilities in relation to building societies; and which Ministers have dealt with those responsibilities during the period since 1 May 1997. [67330]

Ms Hewitt: The Treasury is responsible for policy relating to the Building Societies Acts. I and my predecessor as Economic Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Mrs. Liddell), have dealt with this area since May 1997. Prudential supervision of societies is a matter for the Building Societies Commission.

National Insurance Fund

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the size of the Treasury grant paid to the National Insurance Fund in each of the last five years. [67729]

Mr. Timms: I have been asked to reply.

The information is in the table.

Treasury grant payments into the National Insurance Fund 1993–94 to 1997–98

£ million

Year	Amount
1993–94	7,589
1994–95	6,280
1995–96	3,575
1996–97	1,900
1997–98	940

Source:
Government Actuary Reports on the drafts of the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order and the Social Security (Contributions) (Re-rating and National Insurance Fund Payments) Order 1994 (Cm 2445), 1995 (Cm 2747), 1996 (Cm 3149), 1997 (Cm 3547), 1998 (Cm 3860).

Estonia

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what will be the Estonian contribution for participation in the *(a)* Kaleidoscope, *(b)* Ariane and *(c)* Raphael Programmes; what was the cost of negotiating the level of the contribution; and if he will make a statement on the nature of United Kingdom participation in these negotiations. [66348]

Janet Anderson: I have been asked to reply.

I welcome the fact that Estonia will be participating in the EU's cultural funding programmes for 1999 as part of its preparations for EU membership. Participation in these, and other, programmes is now open to the candidate countries in the context of the pre-accession strategy.

The precise level of Estonia's contribution for participation will be determined by the European Commission in consultation with the relevant programme management committees.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Local Management of Schools

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much was spent per student out of the Local Management of Schools allocations for primary and secondary students up to 16 years in each local education authority in the years *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99. [67298]

Ms Estelle Morris: I have placed in the Library a table which gives, for each local education authority in England, for 1997–98 and 1998–99, the average of the budget share per pupil separately for primary, and for all pupils counted as being in secondary schools.

Education Action Zones

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list those education action zones which have no school currently or previously in special measures. [67293]

Ms Estelle Morris: As of 20 January 1999, seven Education Action Zones have no school currently or previously in special measures. These are:

Birmingham (Aston Nechells)
Hereford
Middlesbrough
New Addington
Newcastle
North Somerset
Leigh (Wigan).

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list for each education action zone the resources provided from other Government initiatives. [67290]

Ms Estelle Morris: This information is not yet available. It will be provided in the audited financial statements which each zone is required to provide by the end of the year.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the total amount spent by his Department on central administration of education action zones; and what is this amount as a proportion of the total departmental expenditure on education action zones. [67292]

Ms Estelle Morris: The running cost of the central administration team is budgeted at £500,000 for the financial year 1998–99. This represents 4 per cent. of the total Departmental programme budget over the same period for EAZs.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment which of the first round of 25 education action zones have applied to vary any of the details of their original bids; and if he will set out the details of such variations. [67469]

Ms Estelle Morris: None so far. The detailed action plans of each EAZ must be submitted to the Secretary of State by 31 March 1999.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what each education action zone is proposing to spend as a proportion of its total budget on *(a)* administration, *(b)* project co-ordination and management not included in *(a)* and (c) salaries not included in *(a)* or (b). [67291]

Ms Estelle Morris: This information is not currently available. It will be included in the audited financial statement which each zone must produce by the end of the year.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list for each education action zone the amount of private sector contribution that has been given in *(a)* cash and *(b)* kind in each case, broken down (b) by type of help provided. [67294]

Ms Estelle Morris: Each of the first 25 Education Action Zones must raise £250,000 from the private sector in the first year, whether in cash or kind. They are well on the way to achieving this. I will publish a complete set of information as soon as it is available.

Literacy Hour

Mr. Lock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what research he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* carried out on the effect of the literacy hour on reading standards amongst primary school pupils. [66978]

Ms Estelle Morris: Recently published evaluations of the pilot National Literacy Project, by OFSTED and the NFER, show that the Literacy Hour is effective in raising standards. Children's reading test scores improved by about 8 to 12 months above what would normally be expected, in less than two years.

Schools began implementing the National Literacy Strategy in September 1998. The DfEE's formal evaluation of the strategy consists of visits by OFSTED to a representative national sample of schools, literacy tests developed by QCA for pupils attending these schools, and an overview evaluation by an international team led by Michael Fullan of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto.

Millennium Volunteers Programme

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) if he will make a statement on the millennium volunteers programme; [67236]

(2) what plans he has to extend the millennium volunteers scheme to Leicester; [67237]

(3) if he will list the *(a)* areas and *(b)* projects which have been involved in the millennium volunteers programme to date. [67238]

Ms Hodge: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I launched Millennium Volunteers on 21 January. We announced that the programme will have a budget of £47.75 million; £12.75 from the windfall levy and an additional £35 million for the period 1999–2000 to

2001–02 which has been secured through the Comprehensive Spending Review. We have also published guidance inviting organisations to bid for funds to run Millennium Volunteers in England. It will be open to organisations in Leicester to make applications for funding if they wish to. There are thirteen Millennium Volunteers demonstration projects; eleven have already contracted with us and we are in discussion with two more. The areas and organisations managing the projects are:

Area	*Organisation*	*Contracted/in discussion*
Inner city areas of Bradford and Shipley	Bradford Council for Voluntary Service	In discussion
Cambridge	Youth Action Cambridge	Contracted
Cambridgeshire	Cambridgeshire Association of Youth Clubs	Contracted
Exeter	British Trust for Conservation Volunteers	Contracted
Herefordshire	Hereford and Worcester Rural Community Council	Contracted
Liverpool	John Moores University	Contracted
London Borough of Southwark	Community Service Volunteers	Contracted
London Borough of Tower Hamlets	Voluntary Action Tower Hamlets	Contracted
Greater Manchester	Prince's Trust Volunteers	Contracted
Newcastle	The National Trust	Contracted
Nottingham	City of Nottingham	Contracted
Sunderland	Community Service Volunteers	Contracted
Hastings and Rother	Sussex Police	In discussion

University Entrants

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what were the proportions of pupils from *(a)* comprehensive and *(b)* private schools who went on to university education in each of the last four years. [67141]

Mr. Mudie *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* The information is not available in the form requested. The table gives the prior educational establishment of students who accepted full-time and sandwich undergraduate places through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS).

Students accepting places in higher education through UCAS by previous education establishment

	Year of entry			
	1995	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
Previous establishment				
Independent	29,441	30,006	31,342	30,602
Maintained	90,074	94,049	100,226	103,310
Other/not known	146,021	144,234	171,750	164,308
Total	265,536	268,289	303,318	298,220
As percentage of total acceptances				
Independent	11	11	10	10
Maintained	34	35	33	35
Other/not known	55	54	57	55

New Deal (Disabled People)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people have found work as a result of the New Deal for the Disabled. [67259]

Ms Hodge: Early results indicate that so far over 100 people with disabilities have found work as a result of the New Deal for Disabled People.

CABINET OFFICE

Departmental Papers (Access for Visually Impaired)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what plans he has for departmental *(a)* White and *(b)* Green Papers to be made available on floppy disk format in a form which facilitates access for the visually impaired. [67851]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The Cabinet Office is about to issue revised guidance to departments on the arrangements for publishing White and Green Papers. This will highlight that, when considering the publishing arrangements for such documents, the information is accessible to people who might otherwise not be able to receive it in printed form. There are a number of options for making such documents available to those who are visually impaired, including braille, large print, audio formats and on floppy disk in plain text format. We will ensure that for all future White and Green Papers produced within the Cabinet Office that, when requested, we will be able to provide floppy disk versions to the visually impaired.

PRIME MINISTER

Iraq

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will assess the impact of the statement of Archbishop O'Brien of the Archdiocese for US Military Services on moral law on the bombing of Iraq, a copy of which has been sent to him. [67624]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* I have read Archbishop O'Brien's statement with interest. I am satisfied that the military action against Iraq was necessary on this occasion, had a sound legal basis and achieved its objectives. I believe the region and the international community is safer as a result.

Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 20 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns *484–85*, on the review of the work of the JCCC, when he expects the review to be completed. [67685]

The Prime Minister: No date has been set for completion of the review.

European Commission (Censure Vote)

Mr. Howard: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his oral answer of 20 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns 907–08, on what basis he stated that half the Tory Group in Europe voted with his party in the censure vote on the European Commission in the European Parliament. [67902]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* On the basis that over half of the European People's Party (the group with which the Conservatives associate themselves) in the European Parliament voted with the Socialist Group against the motion of censure on 14 January.

Fraud Prosecutions

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the Government's policy with regard to the prosecution of those who commit business and personal fraud. [67319]

The Prime Minister: The Government have, for the first time, established overarching aims for the criminal justice system which include reducing crime and the fear of crime, and their social and economic costs. Individual Departments set their own aims and objectives within that framework, and that of the Serious Fraud Office is to contribute to the reduction of fraud and the cost of fraud and the maintenance of confidence in the United Kingdom's business and financial institutions. It seeks to achieve this through the investigation and prosecution of suitable cases as quickly as individual circumstances allow.

Fraud takes many forms and other specialist agencies (e.g. Customs and Excise, Inland Revenue and the Benefits Agency) as well as the police devote a significant portion of their resources to combating it through investigation and prosecution.

Ministerial Disputes

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the current procedures for resolving disputes between Ministers in his Government. [67321]

The Prime Minister: The Cabinet and its Committees provide a mechanism for reaching agreement between Ministers on issues which cannot otherwise be resolved.

Engagements

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 27 January. [66296]

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 27 January. [67398]

The Prime Minister: This morning I had meetings with Ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House I will have further such meetings later today.

Cyprus

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Prime Minister how many times he has paid official visits to Cyprus since May 1997; and what was the purpose of each visit. [67702]

The Prime Minister: I have not visited Cyprus since 1 May 1997.

Chequers

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on his policy on whom he invites to Chequers for official engagements. [67322]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) on 30 October 1997, *Official Report*, column *858*.

Ministerial Conduct

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Prime Minister (1) if he will make a statement on his policy towards Ministers who are found to have misled the public; [67328]

(2) if he will make a statement on his policy towards Ministers who are found to have misled him. [67329]

The Prime Minister: My policy on the conduct of Ministers is set out clearly in the Ministerial Code.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Organic Produce

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the percentage of food consumed in the United Kingdom which is organically grown; and what percentage of this food is grown *(a)* in the United Kingdom, *(b)* in the rest of the European Union and *(c)* in the rest of the world; and if he will make a statement. [67255]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* Sales of organic food accounted for 2 per cent. of UK food sales in 1997, the latest year for which data are available. It is estimated that imported organic produce accounted for around 70 per cent. of sales, of which the majority originated in the European Union.

My right hon. Friend the Minister recently re-affirmed this Government's support for the organic sector in a speech at the Royal Agricultural College, Cirencester. Funding for research and development is set to increase from £1.5 to £2.1 million in 1999–2000. More resources will be given to the Organic Conversion Information Service and payments to farmers wishing to convert to organic production methods will be almost doubled.

Genetically Modified Organisms

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he plans to respond to the

second report of the House of Lords European Communities Committee on EC Regulations of Genetic Modification in Agriculture [HL11]; and if he will make a statement on measures to improve information on GM food for consumers. [67397]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* The Government will respond to the second report of the House of Lords European Communities Committee on EC Regulations of Genetic Modification in Agriculture within the two months prescribed limit.

The Government remain committed to providing clear information so that consumers can make an informed choice about genetically modified (GM) foods. EC legislation agreed last year requiring all food containing ingredients derived from GM soya or maize to be clearly labelled sets an important precedent for the labelling of all GM foods.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the maximum detectable percentage of GM material allowed in finished food produced which permits that food to be labelled as free from GMOs. [67590]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* There is no legal requirement for foods containing GM material below a certain limit to be labelled as free from GMOs. However, the EC Regulation on labelling of GM soya and maize (1139/98) does recognise the need to consider a de-minimis threshold to avoid the situation where low levels of accidental mixing would require a consignment otherwise free of GM material to be labelled as genetically modified. The Government will continue to press the European Commission to reach a conclusion on this issue.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what estimate he has made of the percentage of crops under cultivation which are genetically modified; [67589]

(2) what is the current acreage of GM crops under cultivation. [67596]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* There are currently no GM crops being grown commercially in the UK.

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much genetically modified *(a)* maize, *(b)* soya and *(c)* canola was imported for (i) seed, (ii) animal feed and (iii) human consumption in the last year for which figures are available. [67208]

Mr. Rooker: Import figures for maize, soya and canola can be found in H.M. Customs and Excise Business Monitors in the Library of the House. They do not, however, contain any separate breakdown for genetically modified crops.

Individual import consignments of maize, soya and canola may be used for a variety of purposes, including directly as animal feed, for human consumption or for industrial use. For example, when crushing oilseeds for human consumption, by-products can be used for animal feed.

Climate Change

Mr. Soames: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the potential effects of climate change on British agriculture. [67280]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* My Ministry has funded a substantial programme of research on Climate Change Impacts on Agriculture, which between 1990 and 1997 cost a total of £4.4 million. This work has provided the basis for a booklet aimed at the agricultural industry, which will be published later this year. The booklet will give an indication of how climatic and market conditions may change, and the areas in which farmers may need to consider adapting their activities, as well as providing practical pointers on how farmers might chose to adapt.

The Government have recently established the UK Climate Impacts Programme to take a broader, integrated approach to research on the effects of climate change. MAFF is the major funder of a project being developed under the programme to look simultaneously at the effects of climate change on water resources, agriculture, coastal resources and wildlife in two regions, East Anglia and the north-west. MAFF is also funding a study into the timescale of farm level response and adaptation to climate change in England and Wales.

Trade Balances

Mr. Hayes: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the agricultural and horticultural trade balances *(a)* in the last year for which figures are available and *(b)* in the previous five years. [67772]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* The table shows the UK balance of trade for agricultural goods (food, feed and drink) and horticultural products (fruit and vegetables) for each year from 1994 to 1998. The values shown are at 1998 prices (deflated by the Retail Prices Index).

£ million

	Food, feed and drink	*Fruit and vegetables*
1994	−6,543	3,444
1995	−6,865	−3,817
1996	−8,221	−4,111
1997	−7,494	−3,747
1998 (forecast)	−7,805	−3,758

Egg Production (Salmonella)

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what percentage of egg production was contaminated with salmonella in the last year for which figures are available. [67608]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* A Department of Health funded survey undertaken in 1995–96 indicated that, at retail level, about 1 in 600 UK-produced eggs (0.17 per cent.) were contaminated with salmonella.

Pesticides

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what procedures his Department has for monitoring the use of pesticides in food produce entering the UK. [67554]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* The Government run a surveillance programme for the presence of pesticide residues in food. This is overseen by the Working Party on Pesticide Residues. Around 2,000 to 3,000 samples of both UK produced and imported produce are analysed for a wide range of pesticides. The results of this analysis are published in full in an annual report.

Pesticides Tax

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will publish the report on the impact of a pesticides tax from which the Minister of State quoted during his oral statement on horticulture on 20 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns 863–65. [67454]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* The report on the potential impact of a pesticides tax to which I referred was undertaken by ADAS for the British Agrochemicals Association and the National Farmers' Union. Publication is therefore a matter for these organisations.

Meat Inspectors

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the proposed strike by meat inspectors and its effects on butchers and catering outlets in the UK. [67555]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* The decision by UNISON to consider strike action by its Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) members at the present time is very disappointing. MHS staff have a vital role to play in ensuring the highest hygiene and animal welfare standards are applied within plants. The MHS pay offer is fair and equitable.

After negotiations, the MHS formally offered UNISON a pay offer with a total value of 4 per cent. in August 1998. Negotiations continued and UNISON requested an offer of 4.55 per cent. citing the total package settlement to core-MAFF staff of 4.7 per cent.

In fact the actual cost of the core-MAFF pay aware to staff was 4.2 per cent, with 0.5 per cent. included for one-off structural changes. The range of awards was from 0 per cent. to 6.2 per cent. depending on performance. Unlike the rest of MAFF, performance related pay (PRP) structures do not apply in the MHS. The MHS's total value offer is on par with the current average civil service settlement of 4 per cent. It would not be possible to justify a higher offer for MHS staff, particularly with no PRP element.

UNISON commenced a formal ballot of its members on industrial action on 6 January. The ballot involved 579 responses, with 352 votes for industrial action and 225 against, with 2 returns invalid. UNISON are now required to give the MHS 7 days' written notice of any industrial action.

Contingency Plans have been drawn up to minimise the effect of any industrial action and MHS managers are in contact with plant operators to make all necessary arrangements. The action taken by the MHS to minimise disruption should help to ensure an adequate supply of meat for butchers and catering outlets. Plant operators are being reminded of their obligations under the Food Safety Act 1990 and Meat Hygiene/Specified Risk Material and Animal Welfare Regulations.

Future of Agriculture (Conference)

Mr. Soames: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will publish the proceedings of his recent conference on the future of agriculture. [67279]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* The texts of speaking notes and speeches from the recent conferences on proposals to reform the Common Agricultural Policy have been made available on the Internet at the following address: http://www.maff.gov.uk/farm/agendtwo/agendtwo.htm.

Veterinary Standards

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will place a copy of the Bendixon/Dexter report on standards of veterinary services in the EU in the Library; and if he will make a statement on veterinary standards in the qualifying countries as proposed in the Kennedy report on quarantine and rabies. [67408]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* The Bendixon/Dexter report was produced for the European Commission between 1990 and 1992. A full report on the veterinary service in each Member State was produced, but sent only to the Member State concerned. A summary report was produced which presented a broad view of the findings and recommendations regarding the structure, resources and activities of veterinary services throughout the Community. Only a Synthesis Report was circulated to the Member States, and I will place photo-copies of this in the Libraries of the House, but it is, by now, out of date.

Veterinary standards in EU and EEA countries have been assessed by the European Commission and found to be of an appropriate standard for the purposes of intra-Community trade in animals and animal products.

My officials are examining which islands meet the definition of rabies freedom set by the Office International des Epizooties.

Genetically Modified Material

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is his policy on the traceability of GM material used in food production. [67481]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* Under World Trade Organisation rules it is not possible to require GM material used in food production to be segregated as a condition of import. However, the Government have encouraged the provision of consumer choice by publishing a list of 59 suppliers offering traceable non-GM material. All foods which contain GM ingredients must be clearly labelled under EC Regulations.

Farm Incomes

Mr. Hayes: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the relationship between agricultural incomes and incomes in the general economy. [67771]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* There is very little relationship in the short term between agricultural incomes and incomes in the rest of the UK economy. Although agriculture is subject to some of the influences which impact on the economy as a whole (eg productivity changes, world and domestic demand, and exchange rates), it is also subject to other influences which have a greater impact on the sector (eg the Common Agricultural Policy, weather and world commodity prices). As a single sector, agricultural income is more volatile than that of the UK economy as a whole. Agriculture currently accounts for about 1 per cent. of national GDP and about 2 per cent. of UK employment.

Mr. Hayes: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the present levels of income in *(a)* farming, *(b)* pig production and *(c)* other livestock production. [67770]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* Figures for 1998–99 will be published on 28 January. However, it is clear that net farm incomes for all farm types except general cropping are expected to fall substantially in 1998–99.

Local Deprivation Indicator

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which measures of local deprivation his Department and its agencies use in considering allocation of funds to local projects. [66715]

Mr. Morley: MAFF funds local projects through the English Objective 1 and 5b Structural Funds Programmes and the English LEADER II Community Initiative Programme. The socio-economic parameters taken into account in designating Objective 1 and 5b areas included low levels of agricultural income, low population density and location in less favoured areas. Measures of local deprivation are not used by this Department or its Agencies when considering the allocation of funds to specific local projects within the Objective 1 and 5b areas.

Young Farmers (Assistance)

Mr. Hurst: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assistance is provided to young farmers to obtain their own farm holding. [66871]

Mr. Rooker: The Government provide no specific assistance to help young farmers to obtain their own farm. However, in certain cases, loans can be guaranteed under the Small Firms Loan Guarantee Scheme. In addition, the changes introduced by the Agricultural Tenancies Act 1995 will make it easier for young farmers to gain tenancies because landowners will be encouraged to enter the rented sector.

Objective 5b Status

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the six areas designated to receive assistance under the English Objective 5b Structural Fund Programme. [66901]

Mr. Morley: In England the six areas designated by the European Commission to receive assistance under the Objective 5b Structural Funds Programme are:

The South West—Cornwall, the Isles of Scilly and parts of Devon and Somerset;

The Marches—most of Shropshire and parts of Hereford and Worcester;

The Northern Uplands—parts of Lancashire, North Yorks, Durham, Cumbria and Northumberland;

Lincolnshire—excluding the City of Lincoln and other mainly urban areas;

East Anglia—the Fens, rural Norfolk and the Waveney Valley; and

Midlands Uplands—the Peak District of Staffordshire and Derbyshire.

Tobacco (EU Subsidies)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much the total cost of the subsidy for tobacco producers is in the European Union in the current financial year. [66902]

Mr. Rooker: The amount provided for tobacco expenditure in the 1999 FEOGA budget year is 980 million euro (£687 million[1]).

Note:

[1] Using an exchange rate of £1 = 1.4258 euro.

Distributed Food (Intervention Stocks)

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the categories of persons eligible for distributed food, by country of distribution, sourced from intervention stocks designated for most deprived persons in the community according to 98/657/EC. [66346]

Mr. Rooker: The information requested by the right hon. Member is not available.

Quarantine

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list *(a)* the organisations that have responded to the Kennedy report on the reform of quarantine and *(b)* the organisations and individuals he will be consulting before he announces his decisions on the new regime. [67201]

Mr. Rooker: The organisations that responded are set out in the list. I have no plans to launch a further consultation at this stage, but I will involve those affected as appropriate.

Report on the Advisory Group on quarantine: List of organisations that have submitted evidence.

Alley Cat Allies

American Veterinary Medical Association

Angus Council

Animal Behaviour Centre

Animal Concern, Cumbria

Animal Protection Centre

Animalcare Ltd.

Animals Asia Foundation, Hong Kong

Animals in Almeria

Aquithie Boarding and Quarantine Kennels and Cattery

Ards Borough Council

Army Families Federation
Army Families Federation, Germany
Association of Circus Proprietors
Association of Port Health Authorities
BAA Air Cargo
Ballymoney Borough Council
Bamford J. C., Excavators Ltd.
Barking and Havering Health Authority
Barnet Association of Responsible Dog Owners
Bat Conservation Trust
Birmingham City Council, Environmental Services Department
Blue Cross
Bristol Zoo Gardens
British Airways World Cargo
British and Commonwealth Women's Club of Brussels
British Forces Animal Rehoming Centre
British Medical Association
British Ports Association
British Rabbit Council
British Shipping
British Tourist Authority
British Veterinary Association
British Veterinary Zoological Society
Buckinghamshire Health Authority
Camden and Islington Health Authority
Canadian Veterinary Medical Association
Canine and Owner Education Centres
Canine Partners for Independence
Cat Association of Britain
Cats Protection League
Celtic Travel Connections
Central Science Laboratory
Centre for Tropical Medicine, Oxford University
Chartered Institute of Environmental Health
Clackmannanshire County Council
Clayton and Cox
Coleraine Borough Council
Conservative Countryside Forum
Corporation of London
Daily Mail and General Trust plc
Dansk Kennel Klub, Denmark
Derbyshire County Council
Dog Action Working Group, Scotland
Dorset Health Authority
Dover and Folkestone Quarantine Kennels
Dundee City Council
Durham County Health Authority
East Sussex, Brighton and Hove Health Authority
École de Chiens Guides D'Aveugles de Paris
Electric Veterinary Records Ltd.
Equine DNA Register
Eurocoils Ltd.
European Blind Union
Eurostar (UK) Ltd.
Farmers Union of Wales
Ferne Animal Sanctuary
Fife Constabulary
Firs International Quarantine
Foredown Kennels and Cattery
Four in Hand Kennels
Freight Transport Association
Galley Hill International Kennels and Cattery
German Shepherd Dog Club, Jersey
Glasgow City Council
Golden Retriever Breed Council
Governing Council of the Cat Fancy
Granda Group Plc
Guernsey, States of, Agricultural and Milk Marketing Board
Guide Dogs for the Blind Association
Hampshire County Council
Hearing Dogs for Deaf People
Highland Council
Home Office, Constitutional and Community Policy Directorate
Constitutional Unit (replies for Jersey)
Hull and Goole Port Health Authority
Humane Society of the United States
Independent Animal Health Alliance
Institute of Trading Standards Administration
International Zoo Veterinary Group
Isle of Man Government
Isle of Wight Council
Jersey Animal's Shelter
Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust
Jersey, Health and Social Services
Jersey, States of, Deputy Bailiff
Joint Mobility Unit (service provided by RNIB and GDBA)
Kennel Club
Kennel Holckenhus
Kent County Council, Strategic Planning
Kingston Upon Hull City Council, Public Protection Division
Knightwood Kennels
Lambeth Southwark and Lewisham Health Authority
Leeds Health Authority
Local Authorities Coordinating Body on Food and Trading Standards
Lothian and Borders Police
Lowe Group
Manchester City Council
Merial Animal Health Ltd.
Merton Sutton and Wandsworth Health Authority
Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, New Zealand
Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Finland
Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Forestry, Bonn, Germany
Moonwinds Quarantine and Boarding Kennels and Cattery
National Canine Defence League
National Dog Tattoo Register
National Farmers Union of Scotland
National Federation of the Blind of the United Kingdom
National Gerbil Society
National Institute of Mental Health, USA
National Office of Animal Health Ltd.
Netherlands Anti-Quarantine Action Group
Norfolk County Council
North Ayrshire Council
North and East Devon Health Authority
North Lanarkshire Council

North Lincolnshire Council
North of Ireland Veterinary Association
North Somerset Council
North Yorkshire County Council
North West Anglia Health Authority
Northumberland Health Authority
Oakenshaw Grange Kennels
Old Golfhouse, Veterinary Hospital
Orkney Islands Council
Par Air Services (Livestock) Ltd.
Passenger Shipping Association
Passports for Pets
Pembrokeshire County Council
Pet Advisory Committee
Pet Plan Group Ltd.
Portland House Veterinary Group
Public Health Laboratory Service
Public Health Medicine Environmental Group
Quarantine Abolition Fighting Fund
Quarantine Association
Quarantine Kennels Owners Association UK
RAVC, Animal Defense Support Unit
Royal College of General Practitioners
Royal College of Pathologists
Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons
Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
Royal Welsh Agricultural Society
Scottish Consumer Council
Scottish Landowners Federation
Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
Smithkline Beecham
Smokey Klinic, Veterinary Surgery
Sociedad Protectora Para Animales De Torrevieja, Spain
Somerset County Council, Trading Standards Department
South Ayrshire Council
Spanish Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
St. Andrews Farm Kennels
Starpaws Maine Coons
Suffolk Health Authority
Summerfold Property Management
Unichem
United Kingdom Major Ports Group Ltd.
Universities Federation for Animal Welfare
University of Aberdeen
University of Bristol
University of Edinburgh
University of Glasgow
University of Liverpool
Vets in Support of Change
Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council
West Pennine Health Authority
West Sussex County Council, Directorate of Property and Trading Standards
Westland Golden Retrievers
Westland Helicopters GKN
Zeneca Ltd., Central Toxicology Laboratory.

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which countries will qualify for privileged entry arrangements under the Kennedy report on the reform of quarantine; and how many pet animals were imported from these countries in *(a)* 1998, *(b)* 1997, *(c)* 1996. [67202]

Mr. Rooker: The Kennedy Group recommended that cats, dogs and non-carnivores from EU and EEA Member States and rabies-free islands should qualify for exemption from quarantine, subject to their meeting the conditions for exemption. My officials are examining which islands meet the definition of rabies freedom set by the Office International des Epizooties.

Import figures from EU and EEA Member States were:

Year	*No. of domestic animals imported into quarantine* [1]
1996	3,274
1997	2,968
1998	2,342

[1] Includes all carnivores (e.g. ferrets). Figures are for Great Britain.

Bovine TB

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what research his Department is currently funding into formulating a new TB vaccine for cattle. [67288]

Mr. Rooker: The Krebs report concluded that the development of a vaccine for cattle was the best long-term prospect for the control of bovine TB, but saw a badger vaccine as an alternative option if cattle vaccine requirements cannot be met. Following the publication of the report, we have reviewed our research requirements for bovine TB, and in April published a document inviting proposals. These included work to develop a cattle vaccine and to take forward work on a badger vaccine, which started in 1994. Contracts worth over £1.4 million per annum are being finalised on five projects relating to vaccine development. Nearly all of this expenditure is directed at projects relating to the development and testing of cattle vaccines.

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will introduce routine testing for TB in all cattle. [67271]

Mr. Rooker: Routine testing of the National Herd is undertaken in accordance with Directive 64/432, as amended, and normally exempts certain groups of cattle, mainly young stock or fattening herds in which no breeding takes place. When it is considered necessary, on animal or public health grounds, all cattle are included in routine tests.

Food Standards

Ms Keeble: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he will publish *(a)* the draft Food Standards Bill and *(b)* his proposals for funding the Food Standards Agency. [68082]

Mr. Nick Brown: I have today published the draft Food Standards Bill for public consultation, along with a consultation paper setting out our proposals for meeting

by new costs of the Food Standards Agency through a levy on certain food premises. I have placed copies of both documents in the library of the House.

The draft Bill moves us closer to fulfilling another important manifesto commitment—the setting up of an independent Food Standards Agency with the aim of protecting public health in relation to food. The Agency will play a major role in strengthening consumer confidence.

It provides for a responsible, open and authoritative body charged with protecting public health in relation to food and with powers to act throughout the food chain. The Agency will work with all interested parties to develop soundly based, balanced policies that command the public's confidence. It will discharge a range of important functions in support of its goal, advising Ministers and the new devolved authorities in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and helping all its stakeholders to meet the challenge of safe food.

The Bill provides for the Food Standards Agency to be a UK body. The Government will consult with the new devolved authorities to establish whether they are content to proceed with legislation on a UK basis in the way proposed in the draft Bill.

We want our proposals to be subject to full scrutiny, so that we can get it right from the start. The consultation that begins today seeks comments from all interested parties over the next eight weeks. The draft Bill will also be scrutinised by a Select Committee of Members of this House constituted for this purpose. We will refine our proposals in the light of the comments we have invited. If legislative time permits, we hope to be in a position to introduce the Bill during this session of Parliament.

We have already made considerable progress in strengthening the present arrangements in preparation for the Agency. The challenge now is to ensure that the changes we propose meet the robust standard that consumers and businesses alike can expect.

Organic Farming

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he will take to protect organic farming from possible effects of biotechnology. [66681]

Mr. Rooker: Our approach is to ensure that all justified concerns about genetically modified (GM) crops are properly addressed. This applies particularly to the concerns raised by the organic farming sector. We have made clear to the industry group SCIMAC, which is drawing up guidelines on the use of GM crops that they need to ensure that these contain adequate safeguards to protect organic farming.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 28 January 1999

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Cable Television

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects to reply to Wirral Metropolitan Council's request to review the licence given to Cable and Wireless to provide cable television services in the Wirral. [66653]

Mr. Wills: Neither my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions nor my Department has received a request from Wirral Metropolitan Council to review the licence granted on 16 January 1991 to Britannia Cablesystems (Wirral) Limited, (a subsidiary of Cable and Wireless Communications plc).

Telecommunications (Call Charging)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to ensure that telecommunications companies advertise the rate which they are charging on telephone numbers found in advertisements and say whether callers are being charged whilst held in a queue; and if he will make a statement. [66955]

Mr. Wills: The regulation of telecoms operators is a matter for Oftel. Oftel requires all operators to publish their tariffs. In addition, the Independent Committee for the Supervision of Standards of Telephone Information Services (ICSTIS) has a Code of Practice under which the costs of calls to Premium Rate Services must be given in advertisements.

Information given to callers by queuing systems is a matter for businesses running those systems, not the telecoms operators, and Oftel has no powers to regulate how such end users operate their systems. However, Oftel has encouraged the drawing up of a Code of Practice for such businesses which answer calls from the public. This Code recommends that messages on call queuing systems should tell callers when their call has been answered. The callers should then realise that the call is being charged.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to restrict the prices charged by telecommunications companies for their premium rate calls. [66956]

Mr. Wills: The Independent Committee for the Supervision of Standards of Telephone Information Services (ICSTIS) has responsibility for Premium Rate Services (PRS) in its capacity as the regulator for the Premium Rate Industry. It publishes and enforces a Code of Practice which has provisions limiting the time spent by callers on these services. This has the effect of limiting the cost of calls, and some services are required to be terminated automatically after a given period. The Code also has provisions limiting the total amount of money spent on certain services.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the regulation of the telecommunications industry's call charges. [66954]

Mr. Wills: Oftel sets and is responsible for enforcing the current price controls on the telecommunications industry.

Competition in the telecommunications industry continues to develop and, while it does, Oftel directly regulates the prices of BT, the dominant provider of telecoms services in the UK. In relation to residential consumers and small businesses, BT is required to reduce its main prices by 4.5 per cent. below the rate of inflation, and to focus this control on protecting the first 80 per cent. of residential customers by bill size. Thus consumers who are on a lower income are protected more formally than those higher spending customers who are more likely to have benefited significantly from deep price cuts in international calls. This price control will remain in place until July 2001.

European Structural Funds

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what transitional support will be available to rural areas upon losing Objective 5b status. [67120]

Mr. Wills: The Commission have proposed transitional periods of four years for areas losing Objective 2 and 5b funding. Current Objective 5b covers rural areas. The Government are pressing for equal transitional periods of six years for ex-Objective 2 and 5b areas as for Objective 1. The transitional arrangements for regions losing Objective 5b status will not be known until the new Structural Funds regulations are agreed.

Genetically Modified Organisms

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list his Department's responsibilities and policies in relation to genetically-modified crops and the departments with which he liaises on this issue. [67665]

Mr. Battle: DTI has no direct responsibility for policy relating to genetically modified crops.

The Government's over-riding priority is protection of human health and the environment. They also seek to promote conditions which ensure that the UK derives the maximum quality of life and economic benefits from biotechnology. The DTI has responsibility for policy on science and technology. DTI also has responsibility for those industry sectors sponsored by the Department whose competitiveness may be enhanced through biotechnology. In addition, DTI has the lead role in Government on trade issues.

Policy on biotechnology, including genetically modified crops, is co-ordinated by the Ministerial Group on Biotechnology, as announced by the Prime Minister on 21 October 1998, *Official Report*, columns 1134–35, which is chaired by the Minister for the Cabinet Office. In addition, officials across Government are in regular contact on biotechnology issues.

Electricity Supply Market

Mr. Gummer: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what measures the Government are taking to ensure that the new entrants to the electricity supply market will promote energy efficiency in the domestic sector; [67963]

(2) what measures the Government are taking to ensure that the liberalised energy market delivers higher energy efficiency in the domestic sector. [67964]

Mr. Battle: In the response to consultation on the Green Paper "A Fair Deal for Consumers, Modernising the Framework for Utility Regulation", the Government made it clear that Ministers would issue Statutory Guidance on the social and environmental objectives relevant to regulation for each utility sector. Regulators will be placed under a duty to have regard to such guidance in the exercise of their statutory functions. In addition, the Government are exploring, with the energy industry and others, the possibility of using a new standards of performance scheme to promote energy efficiency, and the options for how standards could work in the context of the liberalised energy markets.

Nuclear Fuel

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he has had with ministers of the German Government concerning the termination of contracts with BNFL for the reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel; and if he will make a statement. [67706]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 27 January 1999]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on 21 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *547*.

Fleetwood Power Ltd.

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will announce his decision on Fleetwood Power Ltd's application to build a new gas-fired power station. [68572]

Mr. Byers: I have decided, after careful consideration of all the relevant factors, that Fleetwood Power's application for a 1,000 MW combined cycle gas turbine power station at Fleetwood should not be granted. The application will be put on hold unless an interested party satisfies me that it should be determined at this stage.

I have taken this decision in accordance with the policy set out in the White Paper entitled "Conclusions of the Review of Energy Sources for Power Generation and Government response to fourth and fifth Reports of the Trade and Industry Committee" (Cm 4071).

The White Paper stated the Government's commitment to electricity market reforms, including reform of the electricity trading arrangements and that until such reforms were substantially completed there would be a stricter power station consents policy with a presumption against the building of new gas-fired generating capacity.

Decisions on other applications under consideration will be announced in due course.

Copies of the Press Notice and the decision letter are being placed in the Library of the House.

Electricity Security (Report)

Ms Moran: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress has been made on implementing the recommendations on electricity system security and stability made by the consultants Merz and McLellan in the White Paper, "Conclusions of the Review of Energy Sources for Power Generation and Government Response to the Fourth and Fifth reports of the Trade and Industry Committee", published in October 1998. [68539]

Mr. Battle: In the White Paper, the Government proposed a two-tier approach: an open consultancy group open to all interested parties, and a smaller steering group which would carry out most of the detailed work allocation and progress chasing. The steering group met on 21 December 1998, to discuss its terms of reference, which are set out, and to consider the way forward. The meeting was chaired by my Department: the members of the Steering Group are also listed.

Terms of reference of Steering Group on Electricity Security and Stability Issues:

"To monitor the carrying out of the Merz and McLellan recommendations in relation to the security and stability of the England and Wales Electricity Grid as published in the White Paper "Conclusions of the Review of Energy Sources for Power Generation".

To report from time to time to an open consultancy group on progress with dealing with these issues.

To report from time to time to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on progress".

Members of Steering Group

Chairman

Neil Hirst—Deputy Director-General, Energy, DTI

Members

Association of Electricity Producers

Eastern Generation

Electricity Consumers' Committees Chairmen's Group

National Grid Company

NORWEB

OFFER

OFGAS

Scottish Power

Transco.

Radioactive Waste

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will estimate the quantities of *(a)* low, *(b)* intermediate and *(c)* high level radioactive waste which will arise from the reprocessing of Swiss irradiated oxide nuclear fuel at Sellafield; what negotiations have been held to date with Swiss authorities concerning the repatriation of the waste; and if Switzerland has indicated whether it would accept its waste to be returned following the application of substitution. [67708]

Mr. Battle: BNFL has signed contracts with all four Swiss utilities for the reprocessing of a total of 422 tonnes of spent nuclear fuel. Under the terms of those contracts BNFL has had discussions with each company on the return of wastes, including substitution. I understand that, although Switzerland is still pursuing the development of deep waste disposal facilities, it has almost completed an

interim storage facility capable of accepting the wastes returned under the terms of the above mentioned contracts, whether as a result of substitution or not.

Dounreay

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the report of the Safeguards Office study of the nuclear materials accountancy aspects of the UKAEA report, Dounreay Shaft Inventory will be made public. [68538]

Mr. Battle: The Government have today published in full the Safeguards Office review of the nuclear materials accountancy aspects of UKAEA's Dounreay Shaft Inventory report.

The main findings of the review are as follows. No evidence was found to support suggestions that have been made following the publication of the UKAEA's Dounreay Shaft Inventory (DSI) report that high enriched uranium has been lost from Dounreay, i.e. that it has been stolen, diverted for military purposes or somehow removed from the site using an unidentified route.

The false impression given by the DSI report that there had been a loss of 170kg U-235 over the period 1 April 1965 to 30 September 1968 was the result of a misinterpretation of 30-year old UKAEA records, arising from a misunderstanding of the nuclear materials accountancy terminology in use at that time.

If the nuclear material inventories over this period had been taken according to modern nuclear materials accountancy practices, the material unaccounted for (MUF) would have been significantly less than 86 kg U-235. Even a MUF of 86kg U-235, at less than 1 per cent. of the amount of material processed at Dounreay over the period, would be considered acceptable against present day international standards of nuclear materials accountancy.

Review of the DSI report by nuclear materials accountancy specialists would have provided explanations for and clarifications of information contained in early UKAEA nuclear materials accountancy reports, and thus could have helped avoid the understandable concerns raised by the report as published.

Copies of the report have been placed in the Library of the House.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what has been the total expenditure and the breakdown of expenditure in his Department since May 1997 on *(a)* public opinion research, *(b)* television, radio and newspaper advertising and *(c)* direct mail. [63917]

Mr. Byers: Expenditure from centrally-managed budgets on advertising and direct mail where separately identifiable has been £2.18m and £56k respectively. It is not possible to identify a separate figure for public opinion research.

PRIME MINISTER

Joint Consultative Committee

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister what classification is given to the minutes of meetings of the JCC; and if copies are circulated to Liberal Democrat hon. Members of the JCC. [67474]

The Prime Minister: Minutes of the JCC are classified according to their content.

Members of the Committee of course receive the minutes of the meetings of the Committee.

Loans (Misleading Information)

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Prime Minister what the Government's policy is with regard to employees who are found to have made false or misleading declarations on *(a)* internal documents and *(b)* external documents when seeking loans. [67286]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 27 January 1999]:* The Theft Acts 1968 and 1978 apply to employees and other persons alike.

Overseas Holidays (Costs)

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Prime Minister what total costs borne by the public purse have been for security, administration and other costs related to his overseas holidays since 1 May 1997. [67323]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 27 January 1999]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to his right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) on 9 February 1998, *Official Report*, column *15*.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Queen's Counsel (Retirement Age)

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will set a retirement age for QCs; and if he will make a statement. [67656]

Mr. Hoon: My noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor has no jurisdiction regarding the age at which Queen's Counsel retire. He has no plans to make a statement.

Departmental Papers (Access for Visually Impaired)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has for departmental *(a)* White and *(b)* Green Papers to be made available on floppy disk format in a form which facilitates access for the visually impaired. [67842]

Mr. Hoon: The Lord Chancellor's Department has no plans to make White or Green Papers available on floppy disks but all Departmental White and Green Papers are published on the LCD Internet website which allows the visually impaired to increase text size.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Caesarean Births

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list, for each of the last 10 years, the percentage of live births delivered by caesarean section within each health authority in Northern Ireland. [67704]

Mr. McFall: The percentage of live births delivered by caesarean section in each Health and Social Services Board area in the years 1992 to 1997 are as follows:

Health Board	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
Eastern	12.0	10.2	14.8	17.8	18.5	20.9
Northern	11.6	12.9	14.8	17.2	16.7	19.6
Southern	12.9	15.5	15.0	16.6	17.4	19.2
Western	13.0	12.4	13.2	13.3	14.1	15.9

SOCIAL SECURITY

Pensioners (Stoke-on-Trent)

Mr. Stevenson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the number of *(a)* pensioners, *(b)* single pensioners and *(c)* pensioners in couples in Stoke-on-Trent; and what estimate he has made of the number of (i) single pensioners and (ii) pensioners in couples in Stoke-on-Trent who will qualify for the minimum pension guarantee. [67101]

Mr. Timms: Figures for the number of pensioners are not available at Local Authority level.

As at May 1998 (the latest figure) there were 9,100 pensioner benefit units in receipt of Income Support in Stoke-on-Trent of which 7,800 were single pensioners and 1,300 were couples.

Estimates suggest that approximately 1.5 million pensioners nationally will receive payments from the Minimum Income Guarantee when it is introduced in April 1999. Some 65,000 people not already entitled to Income Support are expected to qualify for the Minimum Income Guarantee. The figures are not available by Local Authority area.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what the target times are for the CSA to deal with applications for compensation; and what are the actual times; [67228]

(2) how many applications for compensation, received by the Child Support Agency before 1 May 1998, are still awaiting determination; [67131]

(3) what is the average time taken for the CSA to determine applications for compensation; [67227]

(4) how many applications for compensation received by the Child Support Agency in the last two years have been determined within 30 days. [67132]

Angela Eagle: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Mrs. Faith Boardman. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Faith Boardman to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 27 January 1999:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Questions to the Secretary of State for Social Security about applications to the Child Support Agency for compensation, normally referred to as special payments.

I am not able to provide all of the information in the precise format that you have requested, but have provided as much as is available.

A special payment is considered where a clear and unambiguous error by the Agency has resulted in an actual financial loss to the client which is not recoverable through other means. Each case is carefully considered on its individual merits and depending on the complexity of the case, the length of time required to reach a decision can vary considerably.

We have a discrete unit to deal with applications for special payments. This ensures that each case receives individual attention and helps achieve fairness and an appropriate standard of consistency in an essentially discretionary scheme.

The difficulties that we faced as an Agency during our first two years of operations are well documented. We built up a substantial backlog of cases awaiting maintenance assessment, and the accuracy of the assessments we completed was not up to the standard we would hope to achieve. Tackling the backlog of cases awaiting a maintenance assessment and bringing cases up to date has been a major priority for us this year, and the result of this has been an increase in the number of applications for special payments. We recognise that the length of time taken to deal with special payments in some instances has been protracted and we have taken steps to address this over the last twelve months.

In December 1997 we reorganised the way we handle special payments and streamlined procedures with the aim of resolving special payments more speedily. We set an internal target to clear applications to special payments within 30 working days of receipt. Prior to establishing the new unit, applications were taking in excess of 90 working days to be dealt with. However as we began to clear our backlog of cases the number of applications for special payments rose significantly. From January 1997 to November 1997 we received 2,253 applications and from December 1997 to December 1998 we received 8,080 applications. Initially we were not able to meet the target we had set ourselves of clearance within 30 working days. Between April 1998 and June 1998 the average clearance time was 51 working days. More recently we have improved on our performance and the average clearance time for new applications between October 1998 and December 1998 was 8 working days.

The number of applications which we received before 1st May 1998 and which are at various stages of action is 410. We expect to have cleared these applications by the end of 1998/99.

We acknowledge that in the past our basic levels of customer service have been unacceptable and we are sorry that our failings may on occasion have caused inconvenience, frustration, distress and financial hardship.

We are very conscious of the importance of applications for compensation but the number of applications is small compared with our overall caseload of over 827,000 live and assessed cases. It has risen as a result of the increases in the Agency's current workloads and of our recent actions to clear the backlog of maintenance applications which had accumulated in the Agency during its first 2–3 years. In 1997/98 the Agency cleared 595,000 maintenance applications compared with 357,000 in 1996/97 and reduced the number of maintenance applications over 52 weeks old from 225,000 to 110,000. We recognise that by improving our underlying service and efficiency we can avoid the need for such applications. We expect to clear the rest of the backlog of maintenance applications over 52 weeks old by the end of 1998/99.

To improve our customer service in other areas we have reviewed the way that we handle complaints and we have increased resources for our Client Helplines and the National Enquiry Line. Also we have extended our hours of opening to cover 8.00am to 8.00pm Monday to Friday and 9.00am to 5.00pm on Saturdays and carried out trials to greatly improve and increase clients' opportunities to

secure a face to face service. Through these measures our aim is to deal with clients' problems at an early stage and prevent problems escalating.

We recognise and have started to address the problems we have in delivering an acceptable level of customer service. Where we discover we have made mistakes or caused delay we will apologise to our clients and do everything we can to put things right as quickly as possible. I recognise that we have a long way to go to remedy our problems fully, but I am confident that our clients will continue to see improvements in the service they receive by the end of 1998/99 and beyond.

I hope this is helpful.

Noise-induced Hearing Loss

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many letters he has received since May 1997 from *(a)* hon. Members and *(b)* others on the war disablement pension paid to ex-service men and women suffering from noise induced hearing loss. [67564]

Mr. Bayley: Records have been kept since 9 October 1998. Since then 74 letters from hon. Members and 6 letters from other sources have been received.

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the cost of abolishing the 20 per cent. threshold for war disablement pensions and gratuities paid to ex-service men and women suffering from noise-induced hearing loss. [67567]

Mr. Bayley: The cost would be approximately £250 million.

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many ex-service men and women suffering from noise-induced hearing loss have been refused a war disablement pension or gratuity due to their level of disablement being assessed to be below the 20 per cent. threshold in each of the last 10 years. [67478]

Mr. Bayley: A War Disablement Pension may be awarded for disablement due to service assessed at 20 per cent. or more. In general a gratuity may be awarded for disablement assessed at less than 20 per cent. However, since 1993, no award has been payable in respect of noise-induced sensorineural hearing loss due to service assessed at less than 20 per cent. This change aligned the War Disablement Pension scheme rules with those under the Industrial Injuries scheme for occupational deafness.

The number of first claims for noise-induced sensorineural hearing loss, since 1993, with assessments of less than 20 per cent. and where, therefore, no gratuity was payable

Year	*Number*
1993–94	39,471
1994–95	17,109
1995–96	4,341
1996–97	3,727
1997–98	3,398
1998–99	[1]1,369

[1] Up to 31 December 1998

Source:
War Pensions Agency

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security for what reasons funding has not been made available to allow further research into noise-induced hearing loss in respect of war pension claimants; and if he will make a statement. [67361]

Mr. Bayley: There is a long standing and proven mechanism in place under the War Pension Scheme to monitor any published scientific evidence which might affect entitlement to a War Pension. The Department does not, therefore, normally fund medical research in this area.

For noise induced sensorineural hearing loss this process was validated by the expert review of the evidence in 1998, which came to the same conclusions as previously reached by the war pensions medical adviser.

NIRS2 Computer System

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many people received overpayments as a result of the loss of contribution records following the shut down of the NIRS2 computer system; what is the total cost of these overpayments; and what action he proposes in respect of recouping these overpayments; [67638]

(2) how many people whose national insurance contribution records were lost as a result of the shut down of the NIRS2 computer system, have not yet received those payments due to them which are reliant on contribution records; and what is the total amount in payments which is outstanding. [67637]

Mr. Timms: During the NIRS2 Migration period, the period from 19 June 1998 to 13 July 1998 during which the transfer of information from NIRS1 to NIRS2 was completed, no contribution records were lost and therefore no payments are due or outstanding as a consequence.

It is too early to give an indication of the number of individuals who have been overpaid benefit as a result of the problems with the introduction of NIRS2. However, all claims on which interim or emergency payments have been made will be subject to review once NIRS2 is fully operational which is expected to be April 1999. All overpayments will be considered on their own merits according to the Department's standard procedures.

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security by what date the NIRS2 computer will be fully operational; by what date all contribution records will be restored; and by what date payments reliant on contribution records will be brought up to date. [67639]

Mr. Timms: The contractor has advised that the NIRS2 system is expected to be fully operational by April 1999. No contribution records have been lost and as a consequence there is no requirement to restore contribution records.

Those Age Related Rebate payments that are dependent upon information held on contribution records are expected to be brought up to date by April 1999.

Contributory Benefits that are paid as a result of information held on National Insurance accounts are expected to be reviewed within a six month period once all the necessary 1997–98 information is held on NIRS2. The Benefits Agency expects to commence work on these reviews in April 1999.

Benefit Integrity Project

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the Benefit Integrity Project will cease operation; and if he will make a statement. [68603]

Mr. Darling: The Benefit Integrity Project will end on 31 March 1999, to be replaced by a new and fairer system. No new cases will be selected for the project after this date. Cases where action has already started will continue to be processed through the remaining stages of adjudication, including review and appeal, in the normal way.

We are determined to ensure that people are receiving the correct amount of benefit. However, there is currently no automatic review mechanism within Disability Living Allowance (DLA). Therefore, from April a new system of periodic review will be introduced. It will incorporate the lessons already learned and will be continually evaluated and refined as it develops. Staff involved in the new processes will receive full training before commencing this new work.

Initially, the new system will exclude DLA recipients whose cases were examined by the Benefit Integrity Project. People with a fixed period award due to end within the next three years will also be excluded. The review process will involve gathering information by postal inquiry and home visits; these methods of approach will be applied across a range of people on all rates and components of DLA contacted to help identify the best means of approach in individual cases. The process will be evaluated after six months of operation and the findings used to continue to improve the process to make it more sensitive to the circumstances of the individual contacted. In addition, we will be testing new ways of gathering evidence in connection with DLA claims. This, plus information from the new review activity, will be used to help shape an active modern service for the future.

We are already talking to disability groups about ways to ensure the new system is sensitive to people's circumstances, and that it is both fair and effective.

Widows' Pensions

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security whether those widows now over the age of 45 who were widowed before the age of 45 will continue to receive the widow's pension at age 60 following the implementation of his reform proposals; and what will be the basis of the calculation of their pension entitlement. [67674]

Angela Eagle: The proposals set out in the consultation document, "Support in Bereavement", would have no effect on current widows.

A woman who was widowed before age 45 and who is receiving a Widow's Pension on reaching age 60, either because she qualified for a Widow's Pension when her Widowed Mother's Allowance ceased or because she was widowed before April 1988, will be able to continue to receive it up to age 65. Alternatively, she can claim Retirement Pension, in which case her Widow's Pension will be carried forward and paid as Category B pension. It may be paid in combination with any Category A pension to which she is entitled on her own contribution record. But in these cases, the basic pension cannot be more than the full rate for a single person and the SERPS cannot be more than the maximum payable to a single person reaching pension age.

CABINET OFFICE

Civil Servants' Travel

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what were the flight number, date, time and place of departure and destination, class travelled, cost and purpose of each flight by senior civil servants in the course of their duties, including attendance at foreign conferences, symposiums and other meetings, between 1 May 1998 and the present; and what were the total costs of the flights of each of the 10 senior civil servants whose flights cost the most between 1 May 1998 and the present. [67263]

Mr. Kilfoyle: This information is not held centrally for all Departments and could be obtained to only disproportionate cost.

Buying Agency

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what targets he has set for the Buying Agency for 1999. [68541]

Mr. Kilfoyle: I have set the Agency the following targets for 1999.

Financial: To generate a return on capital employed of 8 per cent. (excluding costs of restructuring).

Productivity: To reduce the cost per pound of savings by 2.5 per cent. on 1998 outturn.

Customer Satisfaction: To raise customer satisfaction by 5 percentage points over the year.

People's Panel

Dr. Ladyman: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when he intends to publish results from the second wave of research using the People's Panel; and if he will make a statement. [68540]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: The Government are to publish a White Paper at Easter setting out their vision for public services into the next millennium. The People's Panel has an important part to play in this initiative. By listening to, and learning from, people's views, the Government will be better able to provide the services that people want.

The second wave of results from the People's Panel covers pubic attitudes to a wide range of public services, with a particular focus on transport, local democracy and complaints handling. I will, tomorrow, place in the Library of the House a copy of the results from this second wave of research.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Local Radio

Mrs. Organ: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he expects to announce the results of his consultation on the restrictions on participation in companies holding local radio multiplex licences; and if he will make a statement. [68537]

Janet Anderson: The Government consulted on proposed changes to the restrictions on shareholdings in companies which hold local multiplex licences last

November. Having reviewed the responses, we accept that there is a clear case for changing the limits at paragraph 11(4) of part III of Schedule 2 to the Broadcasting Act 1990 (as amended).

Although we still need restrictions in the interests of plurality of ownership, and the diversity of content which such plurality can bring, we accept that larger radio groups must be allowed more freedom to invest across the country if digital is to be a success. We must also ensure that local companies have the opportunity to invest in companies or consortia holding local multiplex licences.

The Government therefore intend to lay an order under paragraph 11(5) of part III of Schedule 2 to the 1990 Act (as amended) before Easter. This will allow investors to hold unlimited shareholdings in up to five companies or consortia holding digital licences. In addition we intend to increase the percentage limit on holdings over and above that limit from 10 per cent. to 20 per cent.

We believe that these changes will address the needs of all parts of the radio industry—both larger radio groups and those companies wishing to make small but meaningful investments in a wide range of digital licences. We will look very closely at the effects of the revised restrictions as more multiplex licences are advertised by the Radio Authority.

Listed Buildings (Ecclesiastical Exemption)

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the ecclesiastical exemption from listed building and conservation area controls. [68601]

Mr. Alan Howarth: My Department and that of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales have now completed a programme of discussions with denominations and other organisations to consider the recommendations in Mr. John Newman's review of the exemption. I am today placing in the Libraries of the House a document which gives details of the changes in denominations' procedures agreed in the course of the discussions. Copies will be circulated to interested bodies.

Against this background my right hon. Friend and I are satisfied that the six denominations which currently enjoy the ecclesiastical exemption should retain it for the time being. This includes the Baptist Union, which Mr. Newman recommended should be the subject of a further review after a year and whose internal procedures have therefore been re-examined by the two Departments. We would envisage a further review of the exemption regime as a whole during the life of this Parliament. Meanwhile we look to the denominations to keep up the momentum of change as required and expect to see substantive progress in all areas where the need for further work has been identified.

We have also reviewed the position regarding the various categories of building (such as those within Church of England peculiars) which at the time of the 1994 reform were outside the scope of the relevant denomination's own procedures and which retained exemption on an interim basis pending satisfactory long-term arrangements. Action is in hand within the denominations to establish such arrangements and the Government want to see these brought fully into effect as a matter of urgency. The Government aim shortly to consult on a draft amendment to the Ecclesiastical Exemption (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Order 1994, the effect of which will be to remove the exemption from any ecclesiastical building not fully covered by an appropriate control procedure and place it under normal secular controls.

The booklet "The Ecclesiastical Exemption—What it is and how it works" will be revised to take account of these developments and reissued during 1999.

HEALTH

Weighted Capitation Formula

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list for each health authority the average wage according to the market forces staff factor of the weighted capitation formula. [66095]

Mr. Denham: The table gives average wages for health authorities compiled from the source data used to calculate the staff market forces factor.

In calculating the staff market forces factor, the data are adjusted in two ways. First, to isolate the effect of geographical location from other factors, for example gender and occupation; and secondly, to reflect the location of the National Health Service trusts from which the health authorities commission their services.

There is to be a wide ranging review of the formula used to make cash allocations to health authorities and primary care groups.

£

Health authority	*Average wage over three years, 1995–97*
East London and the City	501.61
Camden and Islington	482.56
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	478.61
Bedfordshire	464.66
Hillingdon	461.94
Brent and Harrow	438.73
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	429.58
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	427.70
Berkshire	419.20
Kingston and Richmond	414.94
East Surrey	409.65
West Surrey	409.65
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	386.31
Buckinghamshire	384.60
East and North Hertfordshire	379.81
West Hertfordshire	379.81
Croydon	365.90
West Sussex	362.08
Bexley and Greenwich	360.84
Barking and Havering	358.55
Enfield and Haringey	356.07
Wiltshire	351.05
North Cheshire	350.53
South Cheshire	350.53
Stockport	350.53
North and Mid Hampshire	347.66
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	347.66

Health authority	£ Average wage over three years, 1995–97
Southampton and South West Hampshire	347.66
North Essex	346.19
South Essex	346.19
Oxfordshire	346.03
Gloucestershire	346.03
Avon	345.87
Cambridge and Huntingdon	345.53
Barnet	342.43
Bromley	335.10
Redbridge and Waltham Forest	331.72
Birmingham	328.68
Dudley	328.68
Sandwell	328.68
Solihull	328.68
Walsall	328.68
Wolverhampton	328.68
Northamptonshire	327.09
East Kent	326.59
West Kent	326.59
Coventry	326.43
Warwickshire	326.43
Tees	324.84
Manchester	323.67
Salford and Trafford	323.67
West Pennine	323.67
Liverpool	320.66
Sefton	320.66
St. Helen's and Knowsley	320.66
Wirral	320.66
Dorset	317.94
North Derbyshire	317.08
South Derbyshire	317.08
Leicestershire	314.54
Bradford	312.95
Calderdale and Kirklees	312.95
Leeds	312.95
Wakefield	312.95
East Riding	309.49
South Humber	309.49
Gateshead and South Tyneside	306.20
Newcastle and North Tyneside	306.20
Sunderland	306.20
Bury and Rochdale	305.37
East Lancashire	305.37
North West Lancashire	305.37
South Lancashire	305.37
Wigan and Bolton	305.37
East Sussex, Brighton and Hove	304.99
Suffolk	304.31
North Nottinghamshire	303.21
Nottingham	303.21
Somerset	302.94
North Yorkshire	298.71
North Cumbria	298.54
Morecambe Bay	298.54
North Staffordshire	297.84
South Staffordshire	297.84
East Norfolk	297.35
North West Anglia	297.35
Lincolnshire	297.26
Barnsley	295.99
Doncaster	295.99
Rotherham	295.99
Sheffield	295.99
Herefordshire	295.69
Worcestershire	295.69
County Durham	294.87
Shropshire	289.21
Northumberland	282.57
North and East Devon	282.30
South and West Devon	282.30
Isle of Wight	281.71
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	260.86

Notes:

1. The figures are derived from the New Earnings Survey Panel Data Set supplied by the Office for National Statistics, rearranged by health authority area. They represent gross weekly earnings of full-time employees aged 16 to 70 in the private sector whose pay was not affected by absence.
2. The three year average is used to be consistent with the convention used when calculating the staff market forces factor.

Departmental Papers (Access for Visually Impaired)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has for departmental *(a)* White and *(b)* Green Papers to be made available on floppy disk format in a form which facilitates access for the visually impaired. [67840]

Mr. Hutton: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office on 27 January 1999, *Official Report*, column 296.

As the Department responsible for health issues, we aim to make our documents available to the widest possible audiences. The Green Paper, "Our Healthier Nation", included versions in Braille, audio tape and large print and the Social Services White Paper versions in Braille and audio tape.

Texts of Green and White Papers are also available on The Stationery Office website, which many people with less severe visual impairments find very convenient, since they can adjust their own browser software to as large a type as they require.

It has not been our usual practice to offer texts on floppy disks because there has not been significant demand. Availability of texts via the internet may now be satisfying that demand but, if we receive an ad-hoc request for a text on disk, we are happy to produce and supply it.

Prescription Charges

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what plans he has to review the list of exemptions from prescription charges; [66066]

(2) what plans he has to review the operation of exemptions from prescription charges; and if he will make a statement. [66067]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* The current prescription charge exemption arrangements were reviewed as part of the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review. Following the Review, all current prescription charge exemptions will be protected for the rest of the Parliament and existing patient charges will rise by no more than the rate of inflation over the next three years.

Caesarean Births

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list, for each of the last 10 years, the percentage of live births delivered by caesarean section within each health authority in England. [67673]

Mr. Hutton: Information about emergency and total caesarean deliveries by hospital/trust for 1989–90 to 1994–95 is contained in table 31 of the Statistical bulletin "NHS Maternity Statistics 1989–90 to 1994–95". Copies of the bulletin are available in the Library. It is planned to publish a further bulletin with more up to date information in spring 1999. Information about live births delivered by caesarean section within each health authority could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

NHS Budget

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the total NHS budget *(a)* in 1996–97 and *(b)* 2000–01, in 1998–99 prices. [66525]

Mr. Denham: The total National Health Service budget in 1998–99 prices for the years 1996–97 and 2000–01 is contained in the table.

£ million

Year	*Adjusted to 1998–99 prices*
1996–97	34,749
2000–01	40,375

Royal Hospital, Haslar

Mr. Rapson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions have taken place between the Ministry of Defence and the NHS on the planned closure of the Royal Hospital, Haslar; and what plans he has to ensure the maintenance of hospital provision on the Gosport Peninsular. [68073]

Mr. Denham: Following the Strategic Defence Review, the Ministry of Defence decided to close Royal Hospital, Haslar. The local health authority will now be exploring with Royal Hospital, Haslar and colleagues in the Defence Secondary Care Agency the options for the provision of the most effective healthcare for the local population. In the meantime the Ministry of Defence has made a commitment to maintain the service currently provided by Royal Hospital, Haslar until 2002 at the earliest.

Correspondence

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he plans to reply to the letters from the hon. Member for Solihull to ministers in his Department dated 19 November and 16 September 1998. [67975]

Ms Jowell: My noble Friend, the Baroness Hayman, replied to the hon. Member on 26 January 1999.

DEFENCE

Defence Military Assistance Fund (Indonesia)

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer to the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) of 16 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *526–28*, if he will provide a breakdown of the expenditure under the Defence Military Assistance Fund relating to Indonesia in each of the last three years, indicating separately the amounts used to support defence sales. [66623]

Mr. George Robertson: The total committed expenditure for Indonesia under the Defence Military Assistance Fund, DMAF, for the last two years, and the cost of assistance waived under its predecessors, the Defence Policy Fund and the Defence Sales Fund, is as follows:

1995–1996

£691,880 total, of which £583,000 was committed to support of defence exports

1996–1997

£1,675,280, of which £1,629,080 was committed to support of defence exports

1997–1998

£62,400, of which £19,700 was committed to support of defence exports.

Portsmouth Dockyard (Service Personnel)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many service personnel, and at what ranks, are currently attached to *(a)* HMS Ark Royal and *(b)* HMS Intrepid in Portsmouth Dockyard; and at what annual cost per ship. [67248]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I refer the hon. Member to the answers I gave him on 27 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns 265–66.

Chapelcross and Calder Hall Nuclear Reactors

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what is his forecast for the longevity of the tritium production facility at Chapelcross; [67210]

(2) what discussions his Department has had with BNFL about extending the life of the Chapelcross and Calder Hall reactors; and if he will make a statement. [67209]

Mr. Spellar: The productive life of Chapelcross is a matter for BNFL, subject to its meeting the relevant regulatory requirements of the independent regulator, the Health and Safety Executive HSE. I understand, however, that in 1996 the HSE's Nuclear Installations Inspectorate agreed that the reactors could continue to operate for another ten years from 1998, up to a potential age of 50. This agreement was subject to satisfactory results from the normal programme of inspections and some work being undertaken to plant and procedures which was already planned and being implemented.

The Ministry of Defence is currently in the very early stages of discussions with BNFL about the prospects for a further extension of the life of Chapelcross beyond the period quoted.

The Ministry of Defence has had no links with Calder Hall since it was put under IAEA Safeguards in August 1996.

CS Gas

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a copy of the report arising out of the review into CS gas holdings. [67649]

Mr. Spellar: The review includes a substantial amount of material the disclosure of which would be harmful to defence, national security or international relations. I am, therefore, withholding the review material in accordance with the terms of Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

CR Gas

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 17 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *657*, regarding CR gas, if he will list the *(a)* dates and *(b)* circumstances of each occasion on which the possible use of CR gas by the armed forces was authorised following a request for assistance for law enforcement purposes from the civil power. [67629]

Mr. Spellar: The use of CR gas has been authorised on two instances in the past two years where the Armed Forces have responded to a request for assistance for law enforcement purposes from the civil power. I am withholding the details of the circumstances in accordance with Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

CDB Technical Notes (Unclassified Reports)

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a list of the unclassified reports in the CDB Technical Notes series. [67600]

Mr. Spellar: I assume my hon. Friend is referring to the CDB Technical Notes series which was started in April 1995 when the then Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment became part of DERA. Since that date 13 unclassified technical reports have been produced.

I have made arrangements for a list of the titles to be placed in the Library of the House.

Air Strikes (Iraq)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if depleted uranium shells were used in the air strikes by Britain and the USA on Iraq in December. [67453]

Mr. George Robertson: No depleted uranium based ammunition was used by US or UK forces during Operation Desert Fox.

Departmental Papers (Access for Visually Impaired)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has for departmental *(a)* White and *(b)* Green Papers to be made available on floppy disk format in a form which facilitates access for the visually impaired. [67837]

Mr. Spellar: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to him by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office, yesterday, 27 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *296*.

In my Department we currently aim to meet requests on demand for the production of departmental documents in alternative formats such as floppy disk for the benefit of those with a visual impairment whenever it is reasonable to do so.

Territorial Army

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will estimate the operating costs for 101 Battalion REME based at Queensferry for the next five years. [68153]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave on 17 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *656*.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the interval of time between the decision to move 101 Battalion REME from Chorley Barracks to Queensferry and the announcement of the future structure of the Territorial Army on 17 November 1998. [68112]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave him on 26 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *164*.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 15 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *450*, what definition of South Lancashire his Department uses. [68159]

Mr. Doug Henderson: For the purpose of the question to which my hon. Friend refers, the definition used was the area of the county covered by the Lancashire South European Constituency.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will provide details of the cost of the transfer of computer equipment from Chorley to Queensferry 101 Battalion Headquarters. [68155]

Mr. Doug Henderson: No such details are available at this time.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the additional travelling costs that will be incurred by detachments travelling to Queensferry instead of Chorley when the 101 Battalion is transferred. [68156]

Mr. Doug Henderson: We anticipate that any increase in travelling costs incurred by units in Manchester and Grangemouth travelling to Queensferry, will be offset by reductions in such cost incurred by units travelling from Prestatyn and Coventry.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future of the Cadet Force in Chorley. [68158]

Mr. Doug Henderson: My Department is still assessing the options for the Cadet Force in Chorley. I can confirm that any Cadets, whose current accommodation is affected by the restructuring of the Territorial Army, will not be obliged to move until suitable alternative accommodation has been provided.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the Territorial Army centres which he had planned to close or transfer as part of the Strategic Defence Review but which will now remain open; and if he will make a statement. [68072]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Of the Territorial Army Centres that we announced on 17 November 1998 were to close or transfer as part of the Strategic Defence Review none are now to remain open.

101 Battalion REME (Chorley)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 17 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *656*, on REME (Chorley), if he will set out the basis of his estimate of 25 per cent. saving in operating the 101 Battalion REME out of Queensferry instead of Chorley. [68154]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The assessment has been made on the basis of a comparison of the estimated running and maintenance costs of the two sites.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many times Exemption 2 in the Code of Practice on access to Government information was used by his Department in replying to parliamentary questions to justify withholding information in the last 12 months. [68160]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Of 2,731 questions answered by all Ministers in this Department in the year ending 22 January 1999, some or all of the information requested was withheld under exemption 2 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information (Internal discussions and advice) on 13 occasions.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Road Safety (Mobile Telephones)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the number of accidents caused by drivers being distracted by mobile telephones in each of the last five years. [65487]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Information on the number of accidents caused by drivers or other road users being distracted by mobile phones is not collected because of the difficulty of establishing exactly when a road traffic accident took place and whether a mobile phone was in use at the time. However, my Department is aware of a number of media reports over the last few years of road fatalities where the use of a mobile phone was alleged to be a factor.

We continue to warn of the dangers of using a mobile phone while driving. The Transport Research Laboratory report "The use of mobile phones while Driving: a review" shows that hand held mobile phones are inappropriate for use while driving and even hands-free mobile phones cause distraction from the driving task.

Local Deprivation Indicators

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which measures of local deprivation his Department and its agencies use in considering allocation of funds to local projects. [66717]

Mr. Meale: My Department allocates funds for a range of local projects, but usually through third parties such as local authorities. In making allocations to local level we use local deprivation indices appropriate to the expenditure concerned. The main ones are:

Housing—the annual allocation of housing capital resources to local authorities (apart from private sector renewal and disabled facilities grants) and registered social landlords uses Needs Indices which involve an element of targeting to areas of high deprivation as measured by the Index of Local Conditions.

Regeneration—the 1998 Index of Local Deprivation is used to target regeneration funds on the most deprived areas in England.

Rural Regeneration—funding provided through the rural regeneration programmes currently operated by the Rural Development Commission is targeted on the priority Rural Development Areas. These areas were designated in 1994 using a specific set of indicators to identify the key economic and social problems facing rural communities in England.

Local Government—the allocation of revenue support grants to local authorities is governed by formulae which include a number of measures of social and economic deprivation. The details are set out in The Local Government Finance Reports for each year, as approved by the House.

European Structural Funds—the Department manages the English Objective 1,2 and 5b Structural Funds Programmes. The programme areas eligible to receive Structural Funds are determined by socio-economic factors which include measures of deprivation. However, measures of local deprivation are not used by this Department when considering the allocation of funds to specific local projects within Objective 1, 2 and 5b areas.

Lorries (Illegal Operation)

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to paragraph 1.43 of the White Paper, "A New Deal for Transport", what additional measures he proposes for the impounding of illegally operating lorries. [67615]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* We remain committed to introducing a scheme for the impounding of illegally operated heavy goods vehicles. The consultation exercise carried out last year showed that there was overwhelming support for such a scheme. We believe that detaining illegally operated heavy goods vehicles would provide an effective sanction against unlicensed operators by preventing them from continuing to operate and by acting as a deterrent to discourage other hauliers from ignoring the laws on operator licensing.

Pesticides Tax (Hazard Scoring)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on progress on hazard scoring with regard to the taxing of pesticides. [67715]

Mr. Meale: The Government have been exploring the possibility of introducing a pesticide tax as a component of its pesticide minimisation policy. As part of this work, consideration has been given to the relative environmental hazard of the active ingredients contained in different pesticides.

Genetically Modified Organisms

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many man hours are spent by officials at the Health and Safety Executive on monitoring and enforcing the regulations and guidelines covering genetically modified organisms; what estimate he has made of the expected growth in this amount of working time should the United Kingdom allow the expansion to commercial growing; and what is his estimate of the costs involved. [67753]

Mr. Meale: The regulations and guidelines in Great Britain covering genetically modified organisms can be divided into those covering deliberate releases (typically the controlled growing of crops on designated sites) and those covering contained use (typically developmental work involving organisms, animals and plants in laboratories or glass houses).

The Health and Safety Executive inspects and enforces the regulations covering the deliberate release of genetically modified organisms under an agency agreement with the Department of the Environment, Transport and Regions (DETR). In the current working year, 888 hours (120 days or 0.57 person/years) are allocated for inspection and enforcement.

For contained use, in the current year, 1,665 hours (225 days or 1.07 person/years) are allocated for inspection and enforcement. Contained use work will not be affected by any expansion in commercial growing.

If the UK proceeds to commercial cultivation of genetically modified crops, the resources will be increased proportionally to take into account any additional inspection and enforcement duties.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list his Department's responsibilities and policies in relation to genetically-modified crops and the departments with which he liaises on this issue. [67664]

Mr. Meale: DETR has responsibility in England for all issues concerned with genetically modified organisms (GMOs) which may affect the environment and is responsible for reviewing all environmental risk assessments in respect of GM crops.

DETR has lead responsibility for the Genetically Modified Organisms (Deliberate Release) Regulations 1992, as amended, which in conjunction with Part VI of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and the European Communities Act 1972, give effect to Council Directive 90/220/EEC on the deliberate release into the environment of genetically Modified Organisms, as amended by Commission Directive 97/35/EC.

DETR is lead competent authority for the purposes of EC Directive 90/220/EEC and in the wider international field has lead responsibility for taking forward the UK line in the negotiation of a Biosafety Protocol under the Convention on Biological Diversity.

The Health and Safety Executive's (HSE's) specialist inspectors enforce those sections of Part VI of the Environmental Protection Act 1990, and associated Regulations, which concern deliberate release of GMOs into the environment. The enforcement is undertaken on behalf of the Secretary of State and is under the terms of an Agency Agreement.

The human safety aspects of the contained use of genetically modified crops are covered by the Genetically Modified Organisms (Contained Use) Regulations 1992, as amended. HSE is responsible for and enforces those Regulations. Environmental aspects are covered by Part VI of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and associated Regulations—the Genetically Modified Organisms (Risk Assessment) (Records and Exemptions) Regulations 1996, as amended in 1997—for which DETR is responsible. HSE specialist inspectors enforce that legislation on behalf of DETR under an Agency Agreement.

Arrangements between Departments on the control and regulation of the contained use and deliberate release of GMOs is covered by a Memorandum of Understanding between DETR, HSE, MAFF, Scottish Office and Welsh Office and by an agreement between DETR and DOE(NI). Policy on biotechnology, including genetically modified crops, is co-ordinated by the Ministerial Group on Biotechnology, as announced by the Prime Minister on 21 October 1998, *Official Report*, columns *1134–35*, which is chaired by the Minister for the Cabinet Office. In addition, officials across Government are in regular contact on biotechnology issues.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the terms of reference of the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment were last reviewed. [68061]

Mr. Meale: The terms of reference of the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE) have not changed since the committee was established in 1993. The remit of the committee was last reviewed and changed in October 1998 when the Secretary of State asked ACRE in future to advise not only on the direct and indirect effects of genetically modified organisms in the environment but on the possible changes in agronomic practice and subsequent effects on biodiversity.

Road Accidents (Motorway Tuition)

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment his Department has made of the effect on the number of accidents and injuries of making compulsory some form of motorway tuition; and if he will make a statement. [67736]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Since it would not be practicable to make motorway tuition compulsory because many learner drivers are not within reasonable distance of a motorway, we have made no detailed assessment of the likely impact. However, Transport Research Laboratory research[1] based on a large sample of drivers who passed their test in 1988 and 1989 estimates that the accident rate for male drivers in their first three years of driving is about four accidents per million miles on motorways compared to over 18 on major roads away from town centres and over 24 on quiet country or rural roads.

Changes to the practical driving test have been announced which will take effect in the Spring. The test will be longer to allow candidates to be assessed in situations more representative of modern driving

conditions, including higher-speed roads. That will mean that their training will have to equip them to meet those conditions.

Source:

[1] TRL Project Report 111. Cohort study of learner and novice drivers: Part 3, Accidents, offences and driving experience in the first three years of driving.

Ministerial Travel

Mrs. Shephard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will list the occasions on which he has taken an RAF flight since May 1997; and for what purpose; [67413]

(2) if he will list the occasions on which he has used a helicopter at public expense since May 1997; and for what purpose. [67415]

Mr. Prescott *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* I refer to the answers given by my hon. Friend the Minister for Transport in London, on 19 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *838–39*, and 27 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *41*. The RAF flights undertaken by me personally were those on 3 May and 23 July 1997 and 22 January, 23 March, 16 and 22 August and 26 September 1998. Of those, the flight on 3 May 1997 was made by helicopter, as were parts of the journeys from Belfast to Omagh and return on 16 and 22 August 1998. In addition I have made helicopter trips on 14 July 1998 to the opening of Capital One Bank in Nottingham, and on 7 October 1998 on a tour of emergency towing vessels as part of the launch of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency.

Packaging Waste

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the financial cost to the packing industry of complying with EU law relating to recoverable packaging waste. [67682]

Mr. Meale: An assessment of the cost implications of the Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) Regulations 1997, which implement the EC Directive on Packaging and Packaging Waste (94/62/EC) was published when the Regulations came into force in March 1997. This assessment will be updated when measures to amend the Regulations are introduced in due course.

Mr. Burgon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the outcome of his review of the Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) regulations 1997. [68346]

Mr. Meacher: I have considered the conclusions of the Advisory Committee on Packaging as set out in Sir Peter Parker's letters to me of 24 June and 22 December 1998, together with the other representations that were made to me in the course of the review. Subject to Parliamentary approval and, in the case of certain matters, the conclusion of the period for consulting European Union colleagues, I propose to make a number of changes to the Regulations as follows. As these changes are intended to take effect this year, I will introduce measures as soon as possible.

(i) The recovery and recycling targets will be increased in 1999 and 2000 as follows:

Percentage

	1999	*2000*
Recovery	43	45
Material-specific recycling	10	13

Recovery and recycling targets for 2001 will remain unchanged for now, at 52 per cent. recovery and 16 per cent. recycling, in effect, the Directive targets. I will keep these under review in light of further information, including the development of the new Waste Strategy for England and Wales, further work by the Department on packaging data and data returns from businesses and compliance schemes to the Agencies in 1999.

(ii) The Regulations provide that the financial turnover threshold falls from the present £5 million to £1 million in 2000. However, I have concluded that businesses with a financial turnover of between £1 million and £2 million are unlikely to be handling significant quantities of packaging and so, in 2000, only those businesses who have a financial turnover of more than £2 million will come within the scope of the Regulations.

(iii) Currently, the Regulations provide for "wholesalers" to take on the selling obligation for the small retailers that they supply. The Advisory Committee noted that removing this obligation would significantly simplify the obligation on wholesaling businesses, who, in any case, have obligations for the activities they perform on packaging. I consider that the removal of the "wholesaler" obligation is likely to be beneficial provided other incentives are in place to promote the collection and recycling of the packaging passing through small shops and I therefore propose to remove the "wholesaler obligation" from the Regulations.

(iv) I agree with the Advisory Committee that there is considerable potential for increased involvement of consumers in business efforts to increase the amount of packaging waste recovered, to supplement the initiatives of local authorities, voluntary groups and other organisations. I note that some obligated businesses are better placed to ensure that consumers are informed than others, while other businesses have little or no contact with the consumer. It will therefore be a requirement on obligated businesses whose main activity is "selling" to provide information to consumers about the role they can play in increasing recovery and recycling of packaging waste, and in encouraging greater re-use of packaging. A similar requirement will be placed on compliance schemes.

(v) The packaging Regulations are also intended to reduce the amount of packaging used in order to avoid creating waste as far as possible. I attach great importance to further progress on minimisation and want to see what industry can do on a voluntary basis to develop indicators against which performance can be measured.

(vi) A rigorous monitoring and enforcement policy on the part of the Agencies is essential if the mandatory Directive targets are to be met in 2001. The Regulations are based on an approach which shares the burden between the different players in the packaging chain and depends on effective "free rider" deterrence. Currently some 8,900 businesses are covered by registration and this number will rise in 2000 when the turnover threshold test falls. If least-cost compliance is going to be achieved, business needs to be sure that all those who have legal obligations under the Regulations will register and comply with their full obligations. To this end, the Agency fee will rise to £900 with effect from 1999. I welcome the efforts made by the Agencies to strengthen enforcement programmes and I understand that the Agency has started taking proceedings against a number of companies who failed to register in 1998. With effect from this year I will be asking the Agencies to publish their monitoring programmes and report half yearly on number, size and sector of businesses checked for registration, for data provision, and for compliance with the recovery and recycling obligations. I also want to see a report on the allocation of Agency fee income to activities in this area. To

help the Agencies in their monitoring duties, I intend that compliance schemes will be given a deadline of 15 April for the full provision of data relating to all their members, and 30 June for the provision of updated operational plans. The registration deadline for individual businesses and compliance schemes will be 7 April each year.

(vii) I am aware of the challenging nature of the data requirement but I note that business is itself keen to have as accurate as possible a base-line figure for the tonnage of packaging in the waste stream against which to plan. My Department's provisional estimate of packaging in the waste stream is approximately 8.5 million tonnes, rising to some 9.7 million tonnes once wood and other packaging materials are included. The more accurate the data provided by obligated parties, the more effective will be the efforts to plan for increasing recovery of packaging waste and meeting targets in 2001. An improved data form is proposed for immediate use, and with a view to easing the data requirement on businesses obligated in 2000 for the first time, the Department has commissioned work to develop "off-the-shelf" data forms for these smaller firms who will have the option of using these forms or collecting and providing data themselves. I am prepared to consider further whether there are alternative ways of collecting data that would meet all Directive requirements and enable business to plan confidently for continued compliance with the Directive targets.

(viii) I have seen the Advisory Committee's recommendation that business concerns about hardship needed to be addressed and their advice that businesses in some sectors could face significant net costs of compliance, particularly if they are not able to pass costs on; that particular concerns had been demonstrated by the convertor sector; and that some interim changes should be made to the percentage activity obligations. The changes the Committee is recommending are a 2 per cent. reduction in the convertor activity obligation (from 11 per cent. to 9 per cent.); a 1 per cent. increase in the activity obligations of packer/fillers (from 36 per cent. to 37 per cent.) and retailers (from 47 per cent. to 48 per cent.).

The Committee has also recommended that a cross-sectoral, independent audit of net compliance costs of all sectors should be carried out in 1999. I welcome the Packaging Federation's support for both these proposals. I am inclined to accept the Committee's recommendations on these points but it will first be necessary to consult more widely on the proposed changes and the Department will be setting this in hand as early as possible.

(ix) I remain concerned that not enough is being done to ensure that sufficient household packaging waste will be available to contribute, as it will have to, to the achievement of the Directive targets in 2001. However, I have noted the advice of the Advisory Committee on this point and the views of the Environment Agency and others. Although separate targets for household waste were proposed in our consultation paper, I do not propose to introduce separate targets for household waste this year. I will be giving further consideration to ways of increasing recovery of packaging waste from the household waste stream.

I am also proposing to make some "technical" amendments to the Regulations to clarify or simplify existing provisions or deal with unintended omissions. I also intend to provide the option for those businesses investing in identifiable re-use systems to spread the cost of their obligations.

I will also made a separate statement shortly about the Packaging Waste Recovery Note (PRN) system.

Lorry and Bus Company Licences

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the offices at which work related to the licensing of lorry and bus companies *(a)* currently takes place and *(b)* took place prior to 1996. [67452]

Ms Glenda Jackson: In respect to Wales prior to April 1996, administrative support for the Traffic Commissioner for South Wales, the licensing authority for operators of buses, coaches and heavy lorries, was provided by staff from the Department of Transport based in Cardiff. The northern counties of Wales are currently the responsibility of the Traffic Commissioner for the North Western Traffic Area, then supported by an office in Manchester. Administrative services are now provided by offices in Birmingham and Leeds respectively. My noble Friend the Minister for Roads and Road Safety has today announced that, subject to Parliamentary approval, a new traffic area for Wales will be established with effect from 1 April 1999. The new traffic area will be administered from Birmingham, although the Traffic Commissioner will continue to hold his public inquiries in Wales as appropriate.

Road Bridges

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what amount has been spent to date on bridge strengthening to implement EU Directive 85/3/EEC; and how much he estimates will be spent to complete implementation, expressed in each case at November 1987 prices. [67595]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* On Highways Agency bridges, the estimated expenditure to 31 March 1999 on the current assessment and strengthening programme is £200m at November 1987 prices. The estimated cost to complete the work is £83m.

The Directive requires strengthening to take place only on routes of strategic importance for HGVs. We are not able to separate expenditure by local authorities for these purposes from more general expenditure on bridge works.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the total costs to highway authorities as a result of bridge strengthening works undertaken to implement EU Directive 85/3/EEC, excluding moneys provided to highway authorities from central Government under TPP allocations. [67593]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* I refer to the previous answer, which provides details of Highways Agency costs to implement bridge strengthening in 1987 prices. We cannot identify local authorities expenditure required for implementation of Directive 85/3/EEC. Not all bridge strengthening work being undertaken by local authorities is a requirement of the Directive.

The assessment programme has provided for a review of the condition and load bearing capability of all local authority bridges in England. Although a proportion of the works planned by authorities are on routes of the greatest strategic importance for HGVs, other works have been identified which authorities wish to undertake to meet the need of their local communities. Authorities also have discretion within their annual capital settlement to adjust the funding given between that for bridge works and that structural maintenance of principal roads.

Motorway Network

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many miles of motorway were open at the end of *(a)* 1979 and *(b)* 1997. [68125]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The information that the hon. Gentleman seeks is available only for financial years, not calender years. On 1 April 1979, there were 1,339 miles of motorway open in England, and on 1 April 1997, the corresponding figure was 1,759 miles. The figures include both trunk road motorways and those for which the local highway authority is responsible.

Radioactive Emissions (OSPAR Meeting)

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the outcome of the OSPAR meeting on radioactive emissions held in Dublin this month; and if he will place in the Library copies of the United Kingdom and other submissions made to the meeting. [67703]

Mr. Meale: The OSPAR technical working group on radioactive substances met in Dublin from 19 to 22 January. It made progress on a range of issues related to radioactive substances in the marine environment of the north-east Atlantic. Copies of UK papers submitted to the meeting have been placed in the Library. It would be for other OSPAR Contracting Parties to make available copies of their papers. A summary record of the meeting will shortly be available from the OSPAR Secretariat, New Court, 48 Carey Street, London WC2A 2JQ.

Nuclear Fuel Reprocessing

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with ministers of the German Government concerning the termination of contracts with BNFL for the reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel; and if he will make a statement. [67705]

Mr. Meale: My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment met Jürgen Trittin, the German Environment Minister, on 20 January to discuss the Environmental Council Programme during the German Presidency of the EU. There was no substantive discussion about the termination of reprocessing contracts between German Utilities and BNFL. Such discussions were held earlier that day between my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, and Herr Trittin. I refer to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on 21 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *547*.

Sellafield

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he intends to make a response to the Environment Agency's proposed decision on the BNFL Mixed Oxide Fuel Plant. [67707]

Mr. Meale: I refer my hon. Friend to my answer of 11 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *189*.

Crossrail

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will make a statement on his policy towards the Crossrail project; [67973]

(2) when his predecessor asked Railtrack to prepare a report on the Crossrail project; and when he expects to receive this report. [67974]

Ms Glenda Jackson: In response to a written Parliamentary Question the then Secretary of State for Transport told the House on 2 April 1996, *Official Report*, columns *129–30*, that he had invited the Chairman of Railtrack to consider the Crossrail project with his Board. Railtrack has not responded to this invitation.

The Government's priority is to upgrade the existing Underground: the Public Private partnership will achieve that. It will be for the Mayor to take decisions on the future of the project as part of his or her integrated transport strategy for London, in the light of his or her priorities and the funds available. Meanwhile, the Crossrail route remains safeguarded.

West Midlands Regional Development Agency

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to expand membership of the West Midlands Regional Development Agency to include a representative from *(a)* Worcestershire and *(b)* the business community of the region; and if he will make a statement. [68109]

Mr. Meale: We have in mind to appoint another member to the West Midlands RDA and hope to make an announcement shortly.

Congestion and Parking Charges

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if all revenues raised from congestion charging or private non-residential parking charges will be ring-fenced and re-invested in transport. [66526]

Dr. Reid: The Government's proposal, set out in its consultation document, "Breaking the Logjam" is that 100 per cent. of the net revenues in pilot charging schemes will be retained by local authorities for at least 10 years for spending only on transport-related projects. They will be obliged to set up ring-fenced accounts for this purpose. The Government will have to approve all pilot schemes and will ensure that the proposed spending of the revenues in each scheme represents value for money.

Eurostar Services

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 8 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *135*, if he has commissioned an independent review of alternative proposals for regional Eurostar services; and if he will make a statement. [68573]

Mr. Prescott: I have today announced a competition to seek a consultant to undertake a review of alternative proposals for regional Eurostar services. In addition to addressing itself in particular to the study completed by

Inter-Capital and Regional Rail Ltd., and the alternative proposals put forward by the Virgin Group, the review will include a thorough examination of a broad range of key elements including the points to be served, infrastructure requirements in terms of both rolling stock and track, wider social and economic benefits to the regions of having such services, and the case for carrying domestic passengers. These terms of reference have been informed by the recent report of the Transport Sub-Committee, for which I am grateful. I have asked for a thorough report to be presented to Government as soon as practicable. It is likely to take some months.

Thameslink 2000

Mr. McNulty: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on Railtrack's application for an order under the Transport and Works Act 1992 in respect of the Thameslink 2000 Project. [68604]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We have been advised by Railtrack that they intend making a supplementary Order application which will revise the scope of the proposed works at a number of locations, in particular at Farringdon and London Bridge. These changes arise from Railtrack's consideration of objections made to the original application. The supplementary application is expected to be made by the end of September. To allow time for objections to this application to be taken into account, the Secretary of State has decided to defer until 9 December 1999 the date by which he must give notice of an intention to hold a public inquiry into the proposed Railtrack (Thameslink 2000) Order. We will take a decision before that date if possible but this will depend on when the supplementary application is made.

Ministerial Flights

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on what occasions Ministers in his Department have made journeys by aeroplane funded by third parties since 1 May 1997. [66464]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has made five such journeys: to address the joint Conference of the North West Regional Association and North West Partnership in Windermere; to visit a Freight Distribution Centre in the Midlands; to open the extension to Humberside Airport; to tour the P&O container port in Southampton and to visit Norwich Airport and Felixstowe Port. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment, made two journeys: one to deliver the key note speech at the Institute of Wastes Management conference in Plymouth and the other as part of the International Marine Biodiversity Workshop in Jamaica. My hon. Friend the Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning made two journeys: one to tour Great Yarmouth regeneration projects and the other on a fact finding tour of a quarry. My hon. Friend the Minister for London and Construction also made two such journeys: a tour of Barking Reach housing development and a fact finding visit to a quarry.

I visited the General Lighthouse Authority's Pharos Lightship ship and in addition, I visited Australia in September 1998, not in my Ministerial capacity, to speak to and meet women's organisations interested in increasing the participation of women in Parliament and public life. My visit, including travel costs, was sponsored by Emily's List of Australia as recorded in the Parliamentary Register of Members' Interests. While in Australia, I attended a number of meetings in my official capacity, including an International Conference on Mobility and Transport for Elderly and Disabled People.

Planning Legislation

Mr. Flight: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on Railtrack's position as regards planning legislation, with particular reference to demolition of property. [67097]

Mr. Raynsford: The carrying out of development of land generally requires planning permission. This normally entails a planning application but the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 grants a general permission (through permitted development rights) for various types of development. Where Railtrack carried out works which fall within the definition of permitted development under Class A of Part II or Part 17 of Schedule 2 to the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995, it will enjoy permitted development rights and will not need to submit a planning application.

Demolition of property requires planning permission where it meets the definition of development. Under the Town and Country Planning (Demolition—Description of Buildings) Direction 1995, planning permission is only required for the total demolition of dwellinghouses and buildings adjoining them outside conservation areas, and for the demolition of the whole or part of a gate, fence, wall or other means of enclosure within conservation areas. Part 31 of Schedule 2 to the General Permitted Development Order then grants permitted development rights for the demolition of these descriptions of buildings, subject to certain conditions. However, listed building consent or conservation area consent for the total or substantial demolition of buildings may also be required. These provisions apply to Railtrack as they do to other prospective developers.

Planning League Table

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the cost to public funds of compiling the planning league table. [67876]

Mr. Raynsford: The cost to the Department of producing Tables 5 to 9 of the Planning Performance Checklist published on 12 January 1999 was approximately £180.

Motor Vehicle Accidents

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many motor vehicle accidents occurred in the last year for which figures are available on *(a)* motorways, *(b)* other trunk roads and *(c)* other roads; and if he will make a statement. [67735]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The information requested is shown in the table.

Number of injury road accidents in GB involving one or more motor vehicle [1]

	1997
Motorways	8,676
Trunk A roads[2]	20,255
Other A roads[2]	90,260
All A roads	110,515
Others	119,462

[1] Accidents involving only non-motorised vehicles are not included. There were an additional 1,393 in 1997 which involved only non-motorised vehicles

[2] Trunk A Road data for 1997 is provisional

Mayor of London (Salary)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to make a decision on the salary of the Mayor of London. [67880]

Mr. Raynsford: I will be inviting the Senior Salaries Review Body to advise me on the salaries for the Mayor of London and the London Assembly Members. We will announce our decision when we have had an opportunity to consider its recommendations.

Planning Applications

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is proposing to accelerate the processing of planning applications. [67879]

Mr. Raynsford: Local planning authorities handle some half a million planning applications every year. It is essential that these are processed efficiently and effectively.

In his Modernising Planning Statement, published on 15 January 1998, my hon. Friend, the Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning, set out a range of measures designed to make the planning system operate more efficiently and effectively. This included initiatives to improve the handling of planning applications.

In April 1998, the Government published good practice guides on development briefs and the one stop shop approach to development-related approvals. Other initiatives include funding of a good practice guide on 'Best Value' in planning being drawn up by the Planning Officers' Society; a review of consultation procedures for planning applications; and a review of procedures for handling listed building consent applications.

The Government are continuing to monitor closely local authorities' performance in reaching decisions on planning applications and publishes regular Planning Performance Checklists. My hon. Friend is currently holding a series of meetings with a selection of local authorities in each English region to discuss handling of planning applications as well as development plan preparation. These meetings are part of our wider commitment to work in partnership with local government to improve the planning system as part of the Modernising Planning initiative and provide an opportunity to share good practice experience.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Departmental Papers (Access for Visually Impaired)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Attorney-General what plans he has for departmental *(a)* White and *(b)* Green Papers to be made available on floppy disk format in a form which facilitates access for the visually impaired. [67843]

The Attorney-General: My department has not recently published a White or Green Paper. However, the independent report of the Review of the Crown Prosecution Service (the Glidewell Report) published on 1 June 1998 was made available on the Internet and could therefore be converted for use by the visually impaired.

My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office confirmed in his reply on 27 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *296*, that the Cabinet Office will shortly issue guidelines on the arrangements for publishing White and Green Papers; and I would expect any such publications produced by this office to comply with that guidance.

TREASURY

Tax Harmonisation

12. **Mr. Ruffley:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent representations he has had regarding EU tax harmonisation; and if he will make a statement. [66528]

Dawn Primarolo: The Chancellor gets a large number of representations on many subjects, particularly in advance of a Budget. The Government's position on EU tax issues was set out on 9 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns 388–422, by me and my hon. Friend the Member for Tyneside, North (Mr. Byers) when he was Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

Single Currency

15. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the preparations needed for United Kingdom entry into the single European currency. [66531]

Ms Hewitt: The UK economy needs a period of stability and settled convergence before we could join the single currency. The Government are committed to a programme of economic reforms which are both in the national economic interest and which should help to deliver the stability needed to prepare us for membership.

In addition we will issue an outline National Changeover Plan early this year which will set out the practical steps that would need to be taken if the UK decides to join.

Windfall Tax

16. **Mr. Nigel Griffiths:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the amount to be raised by the windfall tax in the current year. [66532]

Mrs. Roche: The second and final instalment of the Windfall Tax was due in December and £2.6 billion was collected. In total, the Windfall Tax raised £5.2 billion.

22. **Ms Shipley:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what further plans he has for the proceeds of the windfall tax on the privatised utilities. [66538]

Mrs. Roche: The Windfall Tax has enabled the Government to embark on the New Deal—the biggest ever programme to get unemployed and economically inactive people into work. Over 300,000 people have already benefited from the New Deal so far, and over 60,000 have found jobs.

The Government have constantly extended and developed programmes under the New Deal since taking office. Its purpose is to give people new hope and new chances, and a route out of poverty and benefit dependency. This principle will guide future policy development, as resources allow.

Working Families Tax Credit

17. **Mr. Coaker:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress is being made towards the implementation of the working families tax credit. [66533]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue is leading a joint project team with the Benefits Agency which is developing the detailed administrative arrangements for the new tax credit in time for its introduction later this year.

Orphan Assets

18. **Mr. Cohen:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his policy with regard to orphan assets. [66534]

Ms Hewitt: The Treasury's policy on orphan assets (inherited estates) of insurance companies was set out in the Treasury's response to the Treasury Select Committee report on personal pension misselling. This was published in the Committee's First Special Report (session 1998–99) on 18 January.

Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative

19. **Mr. Reed:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on discussions he has had with colleagues in Japan and Germany in advance of the G7 Finance Ministers meeting next month relating to the HIPC initiative. [66535]

Ms Hewitt: The HIPC initiative was discussed with all G7 partners, including Germany and Japan, and with other countries at the Annual Meetings of the IMF/World bank in Washington in October. The Chancellor also discussed the initiative with German Finance Minister Oskar Lafontaine in November. The HIPC initiative will next be discussed at the G7 Finance Ministers' and Central bank Governors' meeting in Bonn on 20 February following Chancellor Schroeder's announcement last week of a new German initiative on debt.

Royal National Lifeboat Institution

20. **Mr. Bob Russell:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to enable the Royal National Lifeboat Institution to recover value added tax on the cost of maintenance work to boathouses. [66536]

Dawn Primarolo: In common with all individuals and organisations, charities, including the RNLI, cannot reclaim VAT on the things that they buy which relate to their non-business activities.

Iraq

21. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he made of the impact on the contingency reserve of recent military action against Iraq. [66537]

Mr. Milburn: The cost of overseas operations will be considered against the Defence budget as a whole when agreeing the Spring Supplementary Estimates.

Youth Unemployment

23. **Mr. Woolas:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what are the current levels of youth unemployment. [66539]

Ms Hewitt: Youth claimant unemployment has fallen by over 100,000 since the general election, to stand at 315,000 last October. This fall has been spurred by the New Deal for young people unemployed for over six months, which has so far helped over 50,000 of them into jobs.

Withholding Tax

24. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent representations he has received on the proposed EU withholding tax. [66540]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply I gave to the right hon. Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith) today, *Official Report*, column 465.

North Sea Oil

25. **Mr. Charles Kennedy:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to revise the current structure of the fiscal regime in respect of North sea oil; and if he will make a statement. [66541]

Mrs. Roche: We have no plans at present to revise the structure of the North Sea fiscal regime.

Low-income Families

26. **Mr. Healey:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact the working families tax credit will have on child poverty during its first year of operation. [66543]

Dawn Primarolo: This Government believe that, for those that can, work is the best way out of poverty. The Working Families Tax Credit, together with the National Minimum Wage and reform of National Insurance Contributions, will help to make work pay and encourage the move from welfare into work. Together, these reforms will provide a guaranteed income for families with children, who are working full-time, of £190 a week.

32. **Mrs. Ellman:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proposals he has to tackle the poverty trap in relation to taxes and benefits for people moving from unemployment into work. [66549]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government have taken a number of steps to make work pay and help people move from welfare into work. The introduction of the National Minimum Wage, reform to National Insurance Contributions and the Working Families Tax Credit will all help to make people better off in work than out of work. Together, these reforms will provide a guaranteed income for families in full-time work of £190 a week.

33. **Mr. Blizzard:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to help working families on low incomes. [66550]

35. **Mr. Watts:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement about his plans to increase the net income of people in work. [66552]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government have introduced a number of measures to increase the net income of low-income families. These include the introduction of the National Minimum Wage, reform of National Insurance Contributions and the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit. Together, these reforms will provide a guaranteed income for families in full-time work of £190 a week.

Banking and Insurance Services

27. **Mr. Khabra:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the action his Department is taking following the Office of Fair Trading's recent recommendation that banking and insurance companies should provide better services for people on low incomes and benefits. [66544]

Ms Hewitt: We are studying the Director General's report.

Electricity Industry

28. **Mr. Stunell:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to introduce a tax rebate system for embedded suppliers using the electricity distribution network. [66545]

Dawn Primarolo: I assume that the hon. Gentleman is referring to the findings of Lord Marshall's report on "Economic instruments and business use of energy". The Government are considering the recommendations carefully.

Euro

29. **Mr. Amess:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions he has held with the Monetary Policy Committee on shadowing the euro. [66546]

Ms Hewitt: The Government have no intention of shadowing the euro.

34. **Mr. Evans:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has receiving calling for the United Kingdom to join the Euroland countries. [66551]

Ms Hewitt: The Government's policy on UK membership of EMU was set out clearly by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his statement to the House of Commons in October 1997. The key factor is whether the economic benefits of joining are clear and unambiguous. To make that decision the Chancellor of the Exchequer has set out five economic tests which would have to be met before the UK could join the single currency.

Public Service Agreements

30. **Mr. McNulty:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his plans for expenditure on the modernisation of the public services in respect of the Public Service Agreements. [66547]

Mr. Milburn: The Public Service Agreements set out the objectives and targets which we will deliver in return for the investment agreed in the Comprehensive Spending Review.

Agenda 2000

31. **Ann Clwyd:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the reasons for the omission of development aid as a priority in the programme of Agenda 2000. [66548]

Ms Hewitt: The Agenda 2000 negotiation will set the overall total for EC aid. During the subsequent discussions, which will determine how this amount is allocated between programmes, the UK will argue strongly for an increase in the share going to the world's poorest countries.

Public Pay Awards

36. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what would have been the cost of not staging last year's pay awards to *(a)* nurses, midwives and health visitors, *(b)* professions allied to medicine and *(c)* teachers. [66553]

Mr. Milburn: It would not have been possible to meet the commitment to keep within spending plans without staging last year's recommendations by the pay review bodies.

Smuggling

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what quantity of beer has been seized by HM Customs officials at Portsmouth Ferry Port in each quarter since January 1993. [67130]

Dawn Primarolo: The information requested is not available in this form. Specific figures are available by each financial year for the quantity of beer from within the European Union seized by Excise Verification Officers at Portsmouth since April 1993.

Year	*Litres*
1993–94	20,753
1994–95	10,874
1995–96	41,747
1996–97	79,397
1997–98	38,906
1998–99	[1]40,629

[1] April to December

Inheritance Tax Exemption

Mr. Lepper: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list for the Brighton and Hove, East Sussex and West Sussex local authority areas *(a)* the locations

of land in respect of which conditional exemption from inheritance tax is currently allowed, *(b)* the number of cases in which such exemption has been lost or deferred tax charged as a result of breaches of the conditions related to exemption in 1998–99 and *(c)* the location of land in respect of which exemption has been lost or deferred tax charged in each of the last five years because of breaches of the relevant conditions. [67204]

Dawn Primarolo: The normal rules on taxpayer confidentiality currently prevent me from providing the requested information.

The Finance Act 1998 strengthened the conditions of the inheritance tax exemption, including the rules on disclosure of information to the public. The Inland Revenue are accordingly reviewing existing exemptions with a view to re-negotiating owners' undertakings so as to secure publication of information about tax-exempt assets and the arrangements on public access. Once the undertakings have been revised, that information will be available on the Internet.

Departmental Papers (Access for Visually Impaired)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has for departmental *(a)* White and *(b)* Green Papers to be made available on floppy disk format in a form which facilitates access for the visually impaired. [67848]

Ms Hewitt: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to him by the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office on 27 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *296*.

The Treasury will make arrangements for White and Green Papers to be made available on disk in a form accessible to the visually impaired, as and when this service is requested.

Currently, all public Treasury documents are produced in the optimum typeface sizes for legibility. These are also available on the Internet, where they can be heard by visually handicapped people who have access to a "talking computer", or can be displayed and printed out as text of any size.

Tax Burden

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the average overall tax burden for a taxpayer in the United Kingdom for each of the last five years. [67731]

Dawn Primarolo: Information on income tax as a percentage of median income for each of the last five years is shown in table 2.8 of Inland Revenue Statistics 1998, a copy of which is available in the Library of the House. Estimating the impact of indirect taxes is imprecise as spending patterns vary widely between households with the same composition and income.

Environmentally Sustainable Economy

Mr. Soames: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he has taken to encourage an environmentally sustainable economy in Britain. [67278]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* The Government's approach to sustainable development is based on four broad objectives: maintenance of high and stable levels of growth and employment; social progress which recognises the needs of everyone; effective protection of the environment and prudent use of natural resources.

The Comprehensive Spending Review included a range of measures expected to make a positive impact on the environment, including additional money for the integrated transport strategy which will help tackle congestion and air pollution; more money for energy efficiency to help alleviate fuel poverty and meet our commitments on climate change; and more money to countryside programmes.

The tax system also has an important role to play in underpinning this strategy. Important changes were made to fuel duties and the landfill tax in the first two Budgets. The Government will continue to explore the scope for using the tax system to deliver environmental objectives, in line with the Statement of Intent on environmental taxation.

VAT

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 14 January 1998, *Official Report*, columns *286–87*, if he will state *(a)* what further key elements will be necessary to change the current transitional system of VAT to a definitive (Common) system other than those contained in Commission Document COM (96) 328 FIN, *(b)* when any Resolution was passed by either House relating thereto and *(c)* what consideration has been given to related proposals in the ECOFIN Council, or any of its subsidiary bodies. [67936]

Dawn Primarolo: Commission document COM (96) 328 FIN is a comprehensive and detailed work programme, with a supporting timetable, for changing the current transitional EC VAT system into an origin-based definitive or Common system. To implement this Common VAT system no further key elements are required.

European Commission (Fraud)

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the establishment of the Inquiry into Allegations of Fraud within the European Commission, setting out *(a)* to whom the report of the Inquiry will be addressed, *(b)* the names of those who will carry out the Inquiry, *(c)* the terms of reference of the Inquiry and *(d)* the Inquiry's (i) powers and (ii) procedure. [67932]

Ms Hewitt: On 14 January the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling, among other things for a committee of independent experts to be convened under the auspices of the Parliament and the Commission with a mandate to examine the way in which the Commission detects and deals with fraud, mismanagement and nepotism. The President of the European Commission agreed to the establishment of such a committee.

I understand that the composition and modus operandi of the committee have not yet been finalised.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the mileage rates currently applicable to staff, indicating what changes have been made to encourage staff to switch from cars to public transport and other less polluting forms of travel. [67493]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* The current standard mileage rates are as follows:

Up to 1500cc: 35.7p

1501–2000cc: 40p

Over 2000cc: 43p

Public transport rate 22.3p.

The Department continues to encourage the use of public transport by providing enhanced public transport information; encouraging alternative forms of transport by providing additional cycle storage areas and by limiting the use of private transport for business purposes.

Tax System

Sir Peter Emery: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received calling for a review of the tax system for older taxpayers in order to provide a simplified system tailored to their needs. [67318]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* I have received a number of representations on this issue.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many times he or his junior Ministers have paid official visits to *(a)* the Czech Republic, *(b)* Poland, *(c)* Hungary, *(d)* Slovenia, *(e)* Estonia and *(f)* Cyprus since May 1997; and what was the purpose of each visit. [67701]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 27 January 1999]:* The Treasury is actively pursuing contacts with all of the applicants to the European Union, including inward and outward visits at official and ministerial level.

In addition the Financial Secretary visited Customs and Excise's UK International Assistance Programme in Prague, Czech Republic between 6–8 November 1997.

Targeted Economic Assistance (Pensioners)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the need for targeted economic assistance to areas which have high concentrations of retired persons. [67256]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 27 January 1999]:* Government spending on retired persons is targeted at individuals rather than at areas. The allocation of extra economic assistance through regeneration spending to particular areas is determined by the Index of Local Deprivation, a comprehensive index made up of a broad range of indicators of deprivation. The Government are also examining the issues which affect retired people at a national and local level in a number of ways, through the Performance and Innovation Unit's work on Active Ageing, the Better Government for Older People pilot areas, the Health Action Zones and other national and area based initiatives.

Charity Taxation

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will publish his consultation document on charity taxation. [67907]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 27 January 1999]:* The consultation document will be published by the time of the Budget.

Advance Corporation Tax

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when his Department will publish regulations enabling unrelieved surplus advance corporation tax to be utilised by companies. [67909]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 27 January 1999]:* We expect to publish the regulations shortly.

Inland Revenue

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many incorrect tax demands have been issued by the Inland Revenue since 20 December 1998. [67908]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 27 January 1999]:* The Inland Revenue issues taxpayers with Statements of Account (not demands) which are a statement of the individual's tax position and include a payslip to enable the taxpayer to make payment if one is due.

The latest issue comprised 3.4 million statements. The Inland Revenue are aware that 870,000 of those statements contained superfluous information which could have misled taxpayers into making a wrong payment.

The Inland Revenue has issued letters of explanation and apology to all affected taxpayers in time to alert them before payment became due.

Pensions Mis-selling

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received concerning the mis-selling of AVCs; and what plans he has to extend the current investigation into pensions mis-selling to include AVCs. [67677]

Ms Hewitt: None. The Financial Services Authority issued a report on the possible mis-selling of FSAVCs on 19 October 1998.

Health and Education

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his plans for public spending on health and education for the next three years. [66542]

Mr. Gordon Brown: The Government's spending plans for the next three years on health and education were set out in the Comprehensive Spending Review White Paper, "Modern Public Services for Britain: Investing in Reform". We are providing money for modernisation, we will invest an extra £40 billion in health and education over the coming three years.

Private Finance Initiative

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the value for money to public funds of using PFI for financing public sector capital developments. [66524]

Mr. Milburn: The Private Finance Initiative is one of the forms of public-private partnerships by which the Government are harnessing private sector finance, innovation and management skills to modernise our infrastructure and improve public services. This Government, unlike the last, are making the PFI work in areas such as the National Health Service. Since the election we have signed £4 billion worth of PFI deals.

Economic Growth

Sir David Madel: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will revise his estimate of economic growth for 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [66527]

Ms Hewitt: The Government's next economic forecast will be published as part of the forthcoming Financial Statement and Budget Report.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Home Detention Curfew Scheme

Lorna Fitzsimons: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the Home Detention Curfew scheme will be implemented. [68426]

Mr. Straw: The Home Detention Curfew Scheme, under which selected short term prisoners may spend up to the last two months of the custodial part of their sentence under a curfew enforced by electronic monitoring, will commence on 28 January. The scheme will provide a managed transition between prison and living in the community. It will deprive them of their liberty for a major part of the day and also provide some structure and order into often disorganised lives. No prisoner will be allowed on the scheme without a risk assessment, and those who fail to comply with the conditions of the scheme may be recalled to prison.

Deportation Orders

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 18 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *330*, on deportation orders, how many *(a)* failed asylum seekers and *(b)* immigration offenders were removed in 1996 and 1997; and how many have yet to be removed. [67338]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information I gave on improved removals performance on 18 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *330*, in response to the hon. Member's question on deportation orders, related specifically to removals and voluntary departures following deportation and illegal entry action. That information, therefore, included asylum applicants who were removed as a consequence of such action but excluded all removals under port procedures.

The numbers of deportation and illegal entry removals and voluntary departures effected during 1996 and 1997 are given in the table. The figures exclude removals under port procedures. The latest snapshot, taken on 4 January 1999, indicates that the number of persons against whom deportation or illegal entry action has been initiated but not yet completed stands at approximately 67,000. In the great majority of these cases, however, there exists at least one legal or similar barrier to immediate removal, such as: an outstanding application for asylum or for leave to remain on another basis; appeals; further representations; Judicial Review; documentation problems; custodial sentences; and absconding. These factors serve to limit the rate at which removals can be effected and, in some cases, may result in the granting of leave to remain rather than removal.

Removals [1] following enforcement action [2], 1996 to 1997

	Number of persons	
	1996	*1997*
Asylum applicants[3]	2,120	3,050
Non-asylum applicants	3,280	3,530
Total enforcement[2] removals[1]	5,400	6,580

[1] Includes "voluntary" departures after deportation or illegal entry action had been initiated.

[2] Persons subject to deportation action under the provisions of sections 3(5) and 3(6) of the Immigration Act 1971 or illegal entry action under section 33(1) of the Immigration Act 1971.

[3] Persons who had applied for asylum at some stage.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications for asylum were received from nationals of *(a)* the Czech Republic and *(b)* Slovakia in each month since 1 May 1997. [67856]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information requested is given in the table. The hon. Gentleman will note that the recent trend is downwards in respect of both counties.

Asylum applications [1,2] received in the United Kingdom, excluding dependants—May 1997 to December 1998, by month, nationals of the Czech Republic and Slovakia

Number

Period	*Czech Republic*	*Slovakia*
1997		
May	5	*
June	15	25
July	30	20
August	30	50
September	15	55
October	85	85
November	20	20
December	15	15
1998		
January	5	5
February	5	15
March	15	15
April	30	10
May	20	15
June	35	35
July	45	125
August	60	230
September	90	250
October	75	115
November	70	15
December	60	15

[1] Provisional figures rounded to 5 with * = 1 or 2

[2] Principal applicants

Either-way Cases

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of defendants charged with an either way offence and electing for trial in the Crown Court pleaded guilty or had their case disposed of without a trial in the Crown Court *(a)* in each of the last 10 years before 1 October 1997 and *(b)* since 1 October 1997. [67572]

Mr. Boateng: The information is not collected centrally.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he had made of the operation of section 49 of the Criminal Procedure and Investigations Act 1996; and if he will make a statement. [67578]

Mr. Boateng: Section 49 of the Criminal Procedure and Investigations Act 1996, which has been in force since October 1997, provides for defendants in either-way cases to be asked to indicate their plea before the magistrates decide whether to accept or decline jurisdiction. The objective was to allow cases which would previously have been committed for trial, and in which a guilty plea was indicated, to be dealt with more quickly, either by the magistrates themselves where the appropriate sentence (after any discount for the guilty plea) was within the court's powers, or if not through being committed to the Crown Court for sentence.

It is too early to make a final assessment of the effect of this provision. The indications so far are that substantially fewer cases are being committed for trial, but that there has also been a significant increase in the numbers committed for sentence. It is estimated (on the basis of data up to June last year) that committals for trial have fallen by 1,500 defendants a month and committals for sentence have risen by 1,300 defendants a month. Work is in hand to assess whether there is scope for magistrates' courts to dispose of more of the cases which they now commit for sentence.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of defendants charged with an either way offence elected for trial in the Crown Court *(a)* in each of the 15 years before 1 October 1997 and *(b)* since 1 October 1997. [67571]

Mr. Boateng: The question cannot be answered from the data collected centrally. However, data from the Attorney-General on the proportion of Crown Prosecution Service either way cases committed for trail to the Crown Court and finalised following the election by the defendant since the year ending September 1988 (earliest year ending September available) are as follows:

Year ending September	*Percentage*
1988	46
1989	43
1990	39
1991	36
1992	37
1993	36
1994	35
1995	33
1996	33
1997	28
1998	28

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what proportion of either way cases were dealt with by magistrates courts *(a)* in each of the 10 years before 1 October 1997 and *(b)* since 1 October 1997; [67574]

(2) what proportion of either way cases were committed for sentence by the magistrates courts to the Crown Court *(a)* in each of the 10 years before 1 October 1997 and *(b)* since 1 October 1997. [67576]

Mr. Boateng: The information is given in the table.

Defendants proceeded against at magistrates' court since 1987 for either way offences, England and Wales

Year	*Percentage committed to the Crown Court for sentence*	*Percentage dealt with at magistrates' courts* [1]
1987	1	78
1988	1	79
1989	1	79
1990	1	80
1991	2	81
1992	1	83
1993	1	84
1994	1	84
1995	1	85
1996	1	85
1997 January-September	1	84
1997 October-December	3	83
1998[2] January-June	4	85

[1] Excludes defendants committed to the Crown Court for sentence
[2] Estimated

Police Funding

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will provide a breakdown, by police force area, of the total funding available to the police in each of the last 10 years. [67584]

Mr. Boateng: The net expenditure by each police authority in each of the last 10 years is set out in the table. A breakdown of the funding components of these totals is not available.

Police net revenue expenditure 1989–90 to 1998–99

£000

	1989–90	*1990–91*	*1991–92*	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99* [1]
Avon and Somerset	95,221	102,351	111,509	124,322	132,421	138,921	147,750	152,087	152,673	167,417
Bedfordshire	32,079	35,599	39,212	44,210	47,958	50,937	55,399	56,627	58,570	62,317
Cambridgeshire	38,444	42,364	47,116	50,027	55,776	57,371	63,089	65,024	68,681	71,230
Cheshire	57,810	62,370	66,960	72,966	79,593	83,254	93,715	94,177	104,005	106,523
City of London	35,285	37,074	40,820	44,246	49,858	51,679	57,541	57,317	57,893	60,862
Cleveland	46,995	51,560	54,802	59,802	63,156	65,412	71,258	73,108	75,426	82,282
Cumbria	35,858	39,961	45,080	49,501	51,698	53,200	55,262	56,856	61,709	63,000
Derbyshire	58,972	61,261	66,048	75,750	78,207	82,924	88,291	90,420	95,641	100,894

Police net revenue expenditure 1989–90 to 1998–99

£000

	1989–90	1990–91	1991–92	1992–93	1993–94	1994–95	1995–96	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99 [1]
Devon and Cornwall	93,697	105,660	117,436	128,271	136,654	139,381	146,556	150,392	155,435	167,117
Dorset	42,908	49,024	52,006	55,644	57,564	62,264	65,818	67,831	69,727	73,497
Durham	41,893	44,964	48,589	53,226	57,065	58,465	68,018	68,035	75,166	78,103
Dyfed-Powys	29,522	30,878	35,150	38,896	41,518	44,381	46,534	47,869	50,952	52,609
Essex	92,207	104,703	115,540	125,833	134,545	142,595	147,795	151,412	157,487	168,889
Gloucestershire	36,299	40,236	44,611	48,067	50,295	54,248	56,623	58,420	58,633	63,780
Greater Manchester	213,529	228,550	248,813	272,190	296,016	311,610	328,297	341,170	353,319	371,497
Gwent	30,444	33,286	36,682	38,965	41,406	42,951	49,907	57,742	64,598	67,919
Hampshire	100,459	111,152	124,970	135,434	143,157	152,584	169,155	172,845	180,791	190,920
Hertfordshire	51,968	58,743	62,868	68,523	72,520	78,004	87,088	88,863	93,011	97,859
Humberside	63,700	69,697	77,396	84,119	88,934	90,589	98,165	99,719	106,220	111,587
Kent	98,455	109,013	128,734	137,696	143,045	151,283	158,316	161,625	174,211	178,916
Lancashire	99,392	108,135	122,019	128,669	138,730	141,648	156,135	161,865	169,275	178,051
Leicestershire	57,279	61,274	68,366	72,784	75,852	79,794	90,205	92,853	98,789	102,707
Lincolnshire	37,548	41,597	47,235	51,065	54,121	57,678	60,495	61,508	66,184	68,322
Merseyside	147,251	160,697	178,884	189,280	202,485	208,608	218,694	221,172	224,327	245,277
Metropolitan Police	1,076,767	1,197,619	1,339,603	1,453,981	1,515,213	1,563,139	1,654,368	1,683,181	1,676,617	1,778,001
Norfolk	42,875	48,115	54,100	59,084	62,209	67,073	72,150	75,547	80,222	82,339
Northamptonshire	37,553	40,084	45,499	50,617	53,410	58,150	59,521	59,252	64,605	67,134
Northumbia	110,667	121,364	132,826	136,534	154,875	168,982	180,743	186,410	195,092	205,380
North Wales	41,084	44,725	50,700	55,897	58,387	61,156	66,185	68,266	70,920	75,075
North Yorkshire	43,887	47,396	51,679	58,444	61,464	61,738	67,355	67,042	71,840	75,638
Nottinghamshire	68,609	75,709	82,629	89,507	95,723	102,518	110,506	113,591	120,556	124,828
South Wales	97,275	106,257	118,537	127,300	130,885	130,371	154,710	147,458	159,411	163,430
South Yorkshire	91,700	94,778	103,166	117,544	124,637	131,753	148,586	150,949	166,027	168,205
Staffordshire	65,688	74,272	82,163	87,742	93,993	98,458	102,587	107,832	110,264	122,540
Suffolk	40,113	43,008	48,069	50,731	54,460	56,056	58,594	60,963	63,676	65,785
Surrey	52,623	57,125	63,421	70,879	74,649	83,544	84,282	85,345	90,976	90,738
Sussex	84,408	92,991	106,178	115,114	119,678	127,828	145,857	150,626	157,631	162,664
Thames Valley	119,989	134,111	149,414	160,512	173,938	186,286	195,850	201,397	210,333	221,147
Warwickshire	31,761	36,082	39,842	42,489	46,084	48,344	47,865	47,686	51,003	53,617
West Mercia	62,268	68,707	77,230	82,670	89,633	95,733	97,860	102,078	107,788	112,879
West Midlands	206,518	229,256	250,816	284,274	292,273	303,279	331,203	337,992	360,129	372,296
West Yorkshire	167,025	181,186	197,226	208,784	219,225	225,767	251,579	265,233	281,745	280,739
Wiltshire	35,676	40,885	46,215	51,400	53,547	58,886	59,359	59,993	58,535	66,666
Total	4,113,701	4,523,819	5,020,159	5,452,989	5,766,857	6,028,842	6,469,266	6,619,778	6,870,093	7,220,676

[1] Estimate

Sources:
1989–90 to 1994–95 From Home Office Police Grant Claims Forms.
1995–96 to 1997–98 From CIPFA Police Statistics Actuals
1998–99 From CIPFA Police Statistics Estimates

Crime Statistics

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will provide a breakdown, by police force area, of the number of crimes *(a)* recorded and *(b)* detected, in each of the last 10 years. [67585]

Mr. Boateng: The available information is given in the tables.

Notifiable offences recorded by the police [1], in England and Wales

Police force area	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
Avon and Somerset	95,277	97,357	124,177	151,071	173,068	173,988	165,765	150,659	153,878	141,650
Bedfordshire	38,707	40,257	52,862	56,597	59,008	58,445	52,062	50,295	51,283	46,845
Cambridgeshire	33,238	36,449	44,035	57,396	65,406	65,327	61,294	67,103	68,204	58,768
Cheshire	45,962	44,858	51,627	61,901	76,183	77,414	72,516	71,427	64,295	58,734
Cleveland	55,244	57,667	70,622	74,424	80,111	73,012	75,248	73,447	72,987	56,618
Cumbria	26,091	27,177	31,922	42,627	43,007	41,537	40,039	39,071	37,603	33,990
Derbyshire	40,133	45,371	56,557	71,853	83,439	87,798	83,485	80,610	77,364	72,159
Devon and Cornwall	71,534	75,456	90,403	106,926	113,413	120,262	108,780	101,332	102,390	94,174
Dorset	34,896	38,907	47,282	51,081	51,767	51,726	53,780	53,344	48,586	42,896
Durham	39,937	41,692	49,957	60,717	62,107	62,759	59,768	52,966	47,428	44,413
Essex	69,471	74,820	93,544	106,109	112,883	112,253	103,683	95,983	98,608	88,293
Gloucestershire	33,196	34,533	41,772	55,317	60,102	60,813	60,260	55,364	53,520	47,399
Greater Manchester	271,599	272,722	312,332	353,177	366,538	342,221	311,718	299,412	299,262	283,075
Hampshire	89,039	95,616	116,773	140,182	149,806	143,920	138,004	130,743	132,647	121,806
Hertfordshire	39,229	40,504	45,166	54,629	58,289	56,039	54,173	55,211	53,742	49,413
Humberside	81,543	87,672	101,279	116,115	126,110	138,882	134,847	127,439	125,993	120,333
Kent	74,565	79,530	99,179	134,197	155,176	158,143	151,996	152,603	142,335	119,116
Lancashire	83,443	77,209	92,985	106,045	115,741	116,672	109,669	109,405	108,365	109,344
Leicestershire	49,286	53,859	71,981	88,890	96,419	98,364	97,483	92,174	92,812	80,257

Notifiable offences recorded by the police [1], in England and Wales

Police force area	*1988*	*1989*	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
Lincolnshire	31,193	34,299	38,034	43,678	47,956	51,378	46,467	46,431	44,450	40,195
City of London	6,485	7,040	7,072	7,551	6,755	5,604	5,261	5,704	4,815	5,129
Merseyside	136,549	129,056	129,876	143,247	144,087	138,344	135,501	151,901	144,410	125,979
Metropolitan Police District	698,323	733,050	810,443	883,934	890,845	848,407	780,821	745,179	827,327	782,387
Norfolk	41,145	43,844	53,982	63,575	66,638	64,081	55,880	51,295	54,831	52,929
Northamptonshire	36,922	38,214	47,392	57,756	58,871	59,307	57,298	56,098	56,390	53,121
Northumbria	153,108	171,733	190,248	208,888	203,836	192,595	180,039	171,408	145,542	126,965
North Yorkshire	32,863	34,190	44,465	49,869	52,869	55,175	58,703	59,643	53,962	48,096
Nottinghamshire	91,006	101,058	128,548	145,903	159,807	153,415	145,584	144,580	136,623	123,370
South Yorkshire	85,037	90,184	102,161	118,972	132,699	153,001	152,451	149,764	146,862	126,754
Staffordshire	54,754	57,596	70,718	84,296	96,988	97,801	93,178	90,936	91,472	88,644
Suffolk	28,914	30,917	36,451	39,175	43,846	42,289	38,440	37,357	36,219	34,788
Surrey	31,264	33,019	41,681	49,252	52,866	52,197	46,556	43,759	41,397	37,840
Sussex	66,093	74,060	93,418	110,931	117,778	106,371	103,548	105,985	112,381	106,475
Thames Valley	106,332	118,377	145,977	185,262	196,074	198,773	184,852	177,345	170,523	156,368
Warwickshire	22,656	24,945	32,419	40,091	44,630	45,126	42,272	38,641	38,674	35,527
West Mercia	46,412	49,211	59,332	71,420	77,489	80,701	81,669	78,298	80,994	75,386
West Midlands	230,417	222,366	257,814	294,704	321,407	323,175	308,207	312,643	307,115	266,474
West Yorkshire	166,195	179,185	227,631	288,745	300,738	299,580	288,449	283,044	267,990	243,373
Wiltshire	25,420	26,636	32,449	38,276	41,104	40,564	37,167	35,617	35,019	32,350
Dyfed-Powys	18,288	16,457	19,568	24,411	26,554	22,877	19,758	17,906	17,404	16,434
Gwent	23,309	23,807	30,169	37,222	39,994	38,922	37,312	32,169	43.143	45,525
North Wales	33,830	33,107	36,153	42,672	47,811	46,981	42,537	41,037	40,384	36,250
South Wales	111,269	112,210	133,176	156,259	163,270	160,811	155,927	150,616	139,147	127,987
Total	3,550,174	3,706,217	4,363,632	5,075,343	5,383,485	5,317,110	5,032,447	4,885,944	4,868,376	4,460,629

[1] Excluding criminal damage £20 and under

Notifiable offences cleared up [1], in England and Wales

Police force area	*1988*	*1989*	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
Avon and Somerset	34,627	32,135	35,395	35,575	28,806	29,769	34,226	35,008	37,590	36,678
Bedfordshire	15,041	13,592	11,712	10,948	11,677	12,110	11,377	11,142	16,955	16,368
Cambridgeshire	11,348	13,707	16,546	20,588	17,498	16,375	15,019	12,626	16,217	15,904
Cheshire	23,076	23,121	25,667	25,172	21,899	19,875	22,049	22,329	22,178	20,902
Cleveland	20,665	21,029	17,351	24,817	25,245	19,758	14,429	18,180	17,872	14,630
Cumbria	13,198	13,343	13,855	17,195	15,749	15,677	14,657	15,639	13,386	13,465
Derbyshire	15,077	16,621	18,228	20,065	18,612	18,278	17,891	16,434	16,175	18,231
Devon and Cornwall	27,468	26,848	28,644	31,019	20,085	30,534	29,257	27,771	30,273	29,826
Dorset	13,653	16,520	16,637	21,091	16,512	17,073	16,373	14,765	13,286	12,491
Durham	17,527	17,622	16,818	18,328	18,761	18,663	19,041	16,113	14,174	13,597
Essex	22,547	23,814	26,868	33,518	32,409	35,991	37,691	31,404	28,346	23,943
Gloucestershire	13,087	12,496	13,819	19,575	14,275	12,134	14,493	14,928	12,240	11,246
Greater Manchester	79,697	82,227	100,074	126,464	129,338	116,938	105,157	71,314	51,885	55,940
Hampshire	30,220	31,023	37,253	39,741	39,154	37,223	36,905	36,552	36,892	36,717
Hertfordshire	16,980	17,678	13,324	18,239	14,904	12,039	13,044	15,270	16,093	15,947
Humberside	29,581	31,073	37,699	36,648	28,960	22,399	23,291	24,347	25,628	23,779
Kent	26,921	25,350	24,370	30,608	41,962	40,163	43,338	40,348	45,139	36,657
Lancashire	42,119	31,011	40,969	42,563	42,459	41,211	36,356	37,607	36,079	32,256
Leicestershire	21,108	21,345	25,820	25,574	28,631	27,391	28,817	26,924	29,093	27,410
Lincolnshire	13,094	14,276	16,449	20,152	18,514	18,755	15,062	17,878	18,648	19,285
City of London	1,616	1,424	1,480	1,526	1,343	1,225	1,406	1,325	1,313	1,340
Merseyside	61,718	57,670	57,452	63,804	60,825	54,101	45,328	40,998	42,174	38,629
Metropolitan Police	120,515	127,984	137,075	149,016	142,746	146,342	175,105	187,671	193,678	202,352
Norfolk	16,369	17,671	20,145	23,281	22,519	17,664	18,936	15,758	17,620	19,503
Northamptonshire	16,829	16,264	16,711	17,782	17,797	16,294	17,595	15,948	19,015	18,836
Northumbria	67,728	67,880	76,654	73,796	34,797	38,227	40,340	39,034	35,038	33,332
North Yorkshire	12,693	12,092	17,726	18,015	17,247	16,816	14,542	13,816	13,703	12,741
Nottinghamshire	34,334	35,607	44,711	38,695	41,312	44,789	40,708	33,897	37,890	35,109
South Yorkshire	39,562	39,222	45,450	42,582	34,981	30,247	36,669	35,589	33,418	36,801
Staffordshire	24,664	24,874	27,892	31,534	29,445	28,602	28,496	29,179	31,178	31,185
Suffolk	12,783	13,222	14,842	14,626	17,086	15,571	13,603	12,831	11,891	12,974
Surrey	10,618	10,944	11,050	11,249	11,596	10,604	14,119	13,649	12,061	12,413
Sussex	19,885	22,727	24,534	25,077	26,935	25,391	24,991	29,297	32,320	27,213
Thames Valley	36,481	39,142	38,175	40,285	38,199	40,948	41,174	41,210	42,383	38,270
Warwickshire	8,906	8,697	9,504	9,641	10,451	9,665	10,202	9,725	9,332	9,587
West Mercia	20,828	19,290	27,128	25,232	26,345	23,035	23,957	21,971	20,831	21,126
West Midlands	97,784	87,225	92,723	90,344	85,305	86,809	77,531	75,279	72,038	63,132
West Yorkshire	71,096	68,512	77,073	79,663	75,243	54,073	58,167	59,012	64,496	66,038
Wiltshire	9,302	12,158	14,196	15,460	15,231	14,395	13,433	11,455	10,164	10,451

Notifiable offences cleared up [1], in England and Wales

Police force area	*1988*	*1989*	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
Dyfed-Powys	9,636	8,637	9,835	12,261	13,986	11,518	10,501	10,147	10,039	10,024
Gwent	12,689	12,839	15,481	17,487	17,677	17,411	17,699	16,093	21,655	23,157
North Wales	14,332	14,644	14,629	15,523	15,949	16,899	16,416	13,336	13,458	12,163
South Wales	41,490	43,403	47,459	44,731	48,399	45,173	36,975	43,076	43,846	46,585
Total	1,248,892	1,246,959	1,379,423	1,479,490	1,390,864	1,328,155	1,326,366	1,276,875	1,287,690	1,258,233

[1] Clear-ups exclude Criminal damage £20 and under

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the occasions on which he and Ministers in his Department have undertaken overseas visits in the course of their ministerial duties since 1997; and if he will give details of the purpose and duration of each visit. [67746]

Mr. Straw: Home Office Ministerial visits overseas since 2 May 1997 are listed in the table:

Minister	*Dates*	*Places visited*	*Purpose of visit*
Secretary of State and Joyce Quin	26 May 1997 to 27 May 1997	Brussels	Justice and Home Affairs Council Meeting
Joyce Quin	9 June 1997 to 11 June 1997	Prague	Council of Europe Justice Ministers Meeting
Lord Williams of Mostyn	15 September 1997 to 19 September 1997	Paris, Germany, Oslo	Fact-finding to look at procedures for investigating suspicious deaths, human rights and community sentences
Alun Michael	16 September 1997 to 18 September 1997	New York	Visit New York Cares Scheme and New York Police
Joyce Quin	17 September 1997	Paris	Debate at Ecole Nationale d'Administration
Joyce Quin	26 September 1997 to 28 September 1997	Sienna	Pontignano Conference
Secretary of State and Joyce Quin	9 October 1997 to 10 October 1997	Luxembourg	Informal Justice and Home Affairs Council
Joyce Quin	20 October 1997 to 21 October 1997	Strasbourg	Meeting with MEPs prior to UK Presidency
Secretary of State	20 October 1997 to 21 October 1997	Paris	Meetings with French Interior Minister and Minister of Justice
Joyce Quin	4 November 1997 to 6 November 1997	Stockholm	Study of tagging and prison organisation
Alun Michael	16 November 1997 to 17 November 1997	The Hague	To present European Crime Prevention Awards and visit juvenile delinquents computer system and day training centre
Joyce Quin	3 December 1997 to 5 December 1997	Brussels	Justice and Home Affairs Council
Alun Michael	5 December 1997 to 8 December 1997	Bosnia	To visit British Police serving in Bosnia
Secretary of State	9 December 1997 to 10 December 1997	Washington	G8 Meeting on Organised Crime
Mike O'Brien	18 December 1997 to 19 December 1997	Luxembourg	Conference on European Year Against Racism
Mike O'Brien	4 January 1998 to 14 January 1998	Pakistan, India, Bangladesh	To observe entry clearance posts
Secretary of State	13 January 1998 to 14 January 1998	Madrid	Meetings with the Spanish Minister of the Interior and Minister of Justice
Secretary of State	26 January 1998	Brussels	Meetings with the European Parliament Civil Liberties Committee, the EPLP and the ELDR
Joyce Quin	28 January 1998	Brussels	To address the European Presidency Racism and Xenophobia Debate
Secretary of State	4 February 1998 to 6 February 1998	Washington, USA	Accompanying Prime Minister: Meetings with National Institute of Justice, Baltimore Police Department, Department of Justice and Attorney General Reno
Mike O'Brien	10 February 1998 to 11 February 1998	Brussels	To attend the 'Lets Kick Racism Out of Football' seminar

Minister	Dates	Places visited	Purpose of visit
Lord Williams of Mostyn	15 February 1998 to 16 February 1998	Paris	To address the OECD Workshop on Global Network Society
Joyce Quin	8 March 1998 to 9 March 1998	Prague	To discuss EU enlargement
Secretary of State and Joyce Quin	18 March 1998 to 19 March 1998	Brussels	To attend Justice and Home Affairs Council Meeting
Lord Williams of Mostyn	21 March 1998 to 25 March 1998	Thailand	To launch a UK funded course on Child Sex Exploitation
Joyce Quin	26 March 1998	Amsterdam	To address the Dutch Probation Conference
Joyce Quin	16 April 1998 to 17 April 1998	Warsaw	To discuss EU enlargement
Joyce Quin	21 April 1998 to 22 April 1998	Vienna	To address the UN Crime Commission
Joyce Quin	28 April 1998 to 1 May 1998	Budapest	To discuss EU enlargement
Secretary of State	14 May 1998	Vienna	Meetings with the Austrian Interior Minister and Minister of Justice
Lord Williams of Mostyn	26 May 1998 to 27 May 1998	Milan	To visit the European Centre for the Validation of Alternative Methods (ECVAM)
Secretary of State and Joyce Quin	27 May 1998 to 29 May 1998	Brussels	To attend the Justice and Home Affairs Council meeting
George Howarth	7 June 1998 to 10 June 1998	New York	To attend the UN Special Session on Drugs
Joyce Quin	29 June 1998 to 30 June 1998	Brussels	To address the European Presidency Civil Liberties and Legal Affairs Committee
George Howarth	30 June 1998	Brussels	To address a meeting of the EU Civil Liberties and Internal Affairs Committees
Secretary of State and Kate Hoey	23 September 1998 to 24 September 1998	Brussels	To attend Justice and Home Affairs Council meeting
Secretary of State	15 October 1998 to 16 October 1998	Avignon	To attend and address a seminar on Family Law and Organised Crime
Kate Hoey	28 October 1998 to 30 October 1998	Vienna	Informal Justice and Home Affairs Council
Mike O'Brien	3 November 1998 to 6 November 1998	Ethiopia and Nigeria	To attend entry clearance conference and observe entry clearance posts
Kate Hoey	4 November 1998 to 5 November 1998	Strasbourg	Council of Europe Ministers meeting on tackling organised crime
Secretary of State and Kate Hoey	2 December 1998 to 4 December 1998	Brussels	To attend Justice and Home Affairs Council meeting
Kate Hoey	6 December 1998 to 8 December 1998	Budapest	Visit to firm up co-operation on organised crime following successful bid for twinning project
Secretary of State	27 January 1999	Strasbourg	To visit the European Court of Human Rights

Ministerial Flights

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his reply to the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) on 19 January 1999, *Official Report*, column 417, if he will list the occasions on which Ministers in his Department have used RAF flights since 1 May 1997. [67745]

Mr. Straw: I refer the hon. Member to my replies to the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) on 19 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *737–38*, and 9 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns 213–14, which list the flights made between 2 May 1997 and 9 December 1998.

Since 10 December 1998, Ministers in this Department have used an RAF aircraft on one occasion, when I flew from Northolt to Culdrose and back this month, to open Falmouth Police Station.

CS Spray

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many times police forces have sent to his Department a written report on the circumstances of an operational use of CS spray for public order purposes since 1990. [67610]

Mr. Boateng: CS spray has only been in use since 1996 and is not intended for use in situations of serious public disorder. It is intended primarily for the personal

protection of police officers, and may be used in certain situations where suspects are disorderly either individually or in group situations and violence is threatened or likely. A written report has been obtained in one case, and information has been received about two others in which CS spray has been used, in response to public concern or inquiries from Members of Parliament and others.

CS dispersed in smoke for use in situations of serious public disorder has been available to all police forces since 1968 for use as a tactical option. It has not been used in England and Wales during the time period in question.

Police Complaints Authority

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) in what circumstances reports of the Police Complaints Authority into particular cases are made public; [67870]

(2) what criteria are used to assess whether a report of the Police Complaints Authority into a specific complaint is made public; [67869]

(3) how many reports of the Police Complaints Authority into specific complaints have been made public; and if he will list them. [67868]

Mr. Boateng: Complaint investigation reports are treated as confidential and are not published. The Police Complaints Authority is restricted by section 98 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 from publishing information received in the course of its work other than in the form of a general summary.

In its report on police disciplinary and complaints procedures, published in December 1997, the Home Affairs Committee recommended that the terms of section 98 should be relaxed to give the Authority greater freedom to explain its work to complainants and the public. The Government accepted that recommendation and will implement it when legislative time permits.

Under section 97(2) of the 1984 Act, the Police Complaints Authority may report to the Secretary of State on any matters coming to their notice to which they consider his attention should be drawn by reason of their gravity or other exceptional circumstances. The report is laid before Parliament and published. Only two such reports have been made by the Police Complaints Authority, concerning the investigation of the West Midlands Serious Crime Squad and the Stephen Lawrence case.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to make further appointments to the Police Complaints Authority. [68693]

Mr. Straw: I have recently appointed Mrs. Molly Meacher to the position of Deputy Chairman of the Authority, following the retirement of Mr. John Cartwright.

Mrs. Meacher has served as a member of the Authority since 1994, and her previous posts include that of Adviser to the Chairman of the Russian Federal Employment Service; Mental Health Act Commissioner; Health Trust non-executive director; and director of Action Trust (now the Employment Policy Institute). Her appointment is for three years with effect from 1 February 1999.

Roger Casement

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set up an inquiry to investigate whether the diaries of Roger Casement released by his Department during his trial were forgeries. [67866]

Mr. Boateng: I have not received any formal requests to review the case of Roger Casement, and currently have no plans to set up any such inquiry.

Correspondence

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what representations he has received in relation to the activities of Mr. X whose name has been provided to him; and if he will make a statement; [67873]

(2) in what capacity Mr. X, whose name has been provided to him, has been *(a)* employed by and *(b)* served Her Majesty's Government. [67874]

Mr. Straw: The hon. Member's letter of 22 January gave insufficient information for me to be able to answer the Question and I have written to him accordingly.

Diarmuid O'Neill

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on what action is to be taken following the report of the Police Complaints Authority into the case of Diarmuid O'Neill. [67867]

Mr. Boateng: The Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police tells me that the report of the police investigation, which was supervised by the Police Complaints Authority (PCA), was sent to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) on 20 November. As at 26 January, no decisions had been taken by the CPS about bringing to criminal charges. No decision on disciplinary action will be taken by the PCA, and the Metropolitan Police, until the CPS have decided whether to institute criminal proceedings.

Voluntary Sector Grants

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to publish the relevant statistics covering central Government department grants to the voluntary sector over the last two years. [67725]

Mr. Boateng: Information relating to grants made by Government Departments to the voluntary sector over the period 1995–96 to 1997–98 is currently being collected. The figures will be published in the Spring.

Police Stations (Wales)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police stations there were in Wales in *(a)* 1976, *(b)* 1996 and *(c)* at the last available date. [67457]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is not collected centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. An alphabetical list of police

stations in Wales and the rest of the United Kingdom can be found in the gazetteer of the Police and Constabulary Almanac, a copy of which is in the Library.

An Audit Commission study of police force estates has been collecting information on the current number of police stations, by force, in England and Wales. The Report is due to be published in the Spring.

Prison Deaths

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many self-inflicted deaths occurred in prisons in the last year; what action his Department is taking to reduce the number of self-inflicted deaths; and if he will make a statement. [67933]

Mr. George Howarth: There were 83 self-inflicted deaths in prisons in England and Wales last year (80 male, 3 female). The Government are committed to doing everything possible to try to reduce the incidence of self-inflicted deaths in prisons. My noble Friend Lord Williams chairs a regular meeting between the Prison Service and a range of representatives from interested groups including: the Samaritans; Howard League; Prison Reform Trust; Inquest; and the Board of Visitors, to discuss how they can work more closely together. We welcome the current thematic review of suicide and self-harm conducted by Her Majesty Chief Inspector of Prisons, the report of which is soon to be published. We look forward to any recommendations he has in this important area of work.

The Prison Service is developing a range of additional measures including: identifying and dissemination of good practice by reintroducing a suicide awareness bulletin; reviewing screening and induction processes to identify those prisoners at risk more effectively so that they can be cared for appropriately; reviewing the use of unfurnished cells for the suicidal; improving cell design to provide a safer environment; identifying alternatives to the use of strip cell conditions in the care of the suicidal; and conducting further research into suicide and self-harm.

The Prison Service is also increasing the involvement of external interest groups through a regular working group and in projects and research into suicides. There has been for some time a close working relationship with the Samaritans, who of course have a great deal of expertise in this area. Listener schemes, whereby prisoners offer support to fellow prisoners, are now established in over two thirds of prisons in England and Wales, the majority of which are supported by the Samaritans.

In addition, instructions and guidance to staff on caring for the suicidal are being re-examined and are soon to be issued as a new Prison Service Order.

Police Stations

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police stations there were, per police force, in each of the last three years for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [67918]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is not collected centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. An alphabetical list of police stations in the United Kingdom can be found in the gazetteer of the Police and Constabulary Almanac, a copy of which is in the Library.

An Audit Commission study of police force estates has been collecting information on the current number of police stations, by force, in England and Wales. The Report is due to be published in the Spring.

Prisoners (Activities)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the average level of purposeful activity per week undertaken by inmates, broken down into *(a)* education and training, *(b)* work and *(c)* rehabilitation programmes, in each prison service establishment, in each of the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [67917]

Mr. George Howarth: Information on the average weekly time spent in purposeful activity by prisoners in each establishment for each of the last three years is given in the table.

Work is defined as time spent in support to works and maintenance staff, workshops, farms, gardens, kitchens and other domestic work. Education and training includes daytime education, vocational training courses, construction and industrial training courses and evening education classes. The Prison Service does not record separately time spent engaged in rehabilitation programmes.

Education and work by prison 1995–98

	1997–98		*1996–97*		*1995–96*	
	Education	*Work*	*Education*	*Work*	*Education*	*Work*
Acklington	2.8	17.9	3.5	17.6	3.3	16.9
Albany	3.9	17.2	2.5	13.5	4.9	16.3
Aldington	5.4	22.5	5.0	22.0	—	—
Ashwell	6.5	21.1	6.7	20.5	7.5	20.0
Askham Grange	9.6	10.0	8.6	9.3	9.0	17.8
Aylesbury	6.3	7.9	6.7	9.1	8.1	9.3
Bedford	3.6	17.5	3.8	19.7	4.1	19.3
Belmarsh	2.3	7.5	2.0	8.4	2.3	10.7
Birmingham	0.9	8.7	1.1	10.2	1.8	11.9
Blakenhurst	3.5	10.8	—	—	—	—
Blantyre House	7.3	11.9	8.3	12.9	9.4	12.7
Blundeston	5.9	13.9	5.8	12.6	4.9	12.6
Brinsford	2.0	8.4	2.7	9.0	3.7	10.4
Bristol	1.2	13.8	0.7	13.6	1.7	15.0
Brixton	1.2	11.6	1.5	11.1	1.9	1.1
Brockhill	7.0	16.3	6.2	19.4	6.6	21.5

Education and work by prison 1995–98

	1997–98		1996–97		1995–96	
	Education	*Work*	*Education*	*Work*	*Education*	*Work*
Bullingdon	5.4	6.8	5.6	8.2	5.9	10.8
Bullwood Hall	8.5	10.5	9.0	11.6	10.4	12.8
Camp Hill	4.6	11.8	6.2	14.5	7.2	15.4
Canterbury	3.3	7.2	4.1	8.7	5.9	10.3
Cardiff	1.9	17.2	1.8	17.1	2.3	17.1
Castington	6.2	10.9	5.5	10.8	6.9	11.3
Channings Wood	5.5	13.8	5.3	14.4	6.8	17.0
Chelmsford	1.2	10.0	1.8	11.4	2.2	11.1
Coldingley	3.9	29.5	2.7	26.1	3.1	20.2
Cookham Wood	4.7	16.4	4.8	16.0	3.5	7.9
Dartmoor	3.4	12.7	3.4	13.3	4.7	14.0
Deerbolt	8.5	8.4	8.5	8.4	9.0	8.5
Dorchester	1.9	10.8	2.8	12.8	3.4	14.2
Dover	6.6	9.9	7.5	10.6	8.0	11.4
Downview	5.3	17.9	5.0	17.5	5.7	16.8
Drake Hall	4.9	23.8	4.6	23.5	5.9	22.8
Durham	2.9	8.4	2.4	8.8	2.8	9.5
East Sutton Park	8.2	19.0	7.6	19.1	8.4	18.0
Eastwood Park	6.1	10.6	7.0	12.0	—	—
Elmley	2.9	10.6	2.9	11.3	4.4	11.8
Erlestoke	7.3	13.8	7.0	14.2	8.3	15.8
Everthorpe	8.5	13.7	9.3	10.9	11.2	15.3
Exeter	1.7	7.8	1.6	7.9	1.8	10.4
Featherstone	2.8	15.1	3.5	15.9	4.2	19.0
Feltham	2.5	9.8	2.5	11.3	3.0	14.3
Ford	6.2	17.1	6.5	17.3	5.8	16.8
Foston Hall	6.9	13.4	—	—	—	—
Frankland	3.7	10.1	3.9	11.1	4.3	11.6
Full Sutton	4.7	9.4	5.1	12.6	5.6	14.9
Garth	4.7	11.9	3.6	11.8	4.3	12.7
Gartree	5.2	14.7	5.1	14.0	6.2	16.0
Glen Parva	3.5	7.8	3.4	9.0	3.9	7.8
Gloucester	3.7	10.0	3.4	11.0	2.8	10.2
Grendon	2.2	10.8	2.3	12.9	3.4	14.3
Guys Marsh	7.2	20.0	9.0	16.9	9.4	19.0
Haslar	5.3	9.2	8.2	9.7	9.2	11.4
Hatfield	10.6	16.2	9.5	21.3	9.8	20.4
Haverigg	3.4	23.4	3.1	23.7	4.9	23.4
Hewell Grange	9.8	21.1	9.6	20.8	8.5	21.2
Highdown	3.6	7.6	4.3	8.9	6.1	9.9
Highpoint	4.9	9.5	3.0	9.0	5.8	12.2
Hindley	8.0	9.9	6.8	10.2	6.5	11.8
Hollesley Bay	3.4	24.1	3.4	23.6	9.3	10.7
Holloway	3.5	10.1	3.3	8.7	3.4	7.7
Holme House	2.6	8.1	3.2	9.0	4.0	8.5
Hull	3.5	12.1	4.5	12.8	5.5	14.9
Huntercombe	7.9	11.0	7.6	10.9	7.3	7.0
Kingston	4.5	20.7	5.3	19.9	5.2	21.8
Kirkham	4.6	34.4	4.7	29.7	4.8	29.9
Kirklevington	2.9	11.5	2.9	13.8	5.0	35.9
Lancaster	6.8	11.1	6.1	10.3	7.0	14.6
Lancaster Farms	6.3	7.6	6.2	6.8	8.2	5.5
Latchmere House	1.1	14.4	1.2	14.0	2.8	10.1
Leeds	1.5	11.0	1.2	11.5	1.4	11.5
Leicester	2.3	15.6	2.3	15.7	2.4	18.0
Lewes	2.5	11.1	3.4	14.9	3.3	14.6
Leyhill	4.7	28.8	4.6	28.2	4.7	28.6
Lincoln	1.4	16.0	1.9	13.7	2.2	15.3
Lindholme	5.0	11.6	5.4	13.1	6.0	14.7
Littlehey	7.0	18.1	7.8	18.1	8.4	19.3
Liverpool	1.9	13.1	1.7	14.5	1.8	13.9
Long Lartin	3.5	9.1	4.2	11.1	4.9	12.8
Low Newton	6.1	11.6	6.8	12.7	7.2	10.5
Maidstone	2.8	15.7	3.1	12.3	3.5	13.7
Manchester	2.5	19.5	1.8	15.7	1.6	15.1
Moorland	7.7	12.2	6.7	12.2	6.6	13.6
Morton Hall	9.0	18.3	9.6	19.5	11.4	18.4
Mount	4.5	8.5	5.5	8.4	7.2	13.0
New Hall	5.1	14.8	6.5	17.1	8.1	17.6
North Sea Camp	6.4	27.4	7.2	25.6	—	—
Northallerton	4.0	5.3	3.3	6.4	4.7	13.5
Norwich	3.3	11.8	4.0	8.4	6.6	11.7

Education and work by prison 1995–98

	1997–98		1996–97		1995–96	
	Education	*Work*	*Education*	*Work*	*Education*	*Work*
Nottingham	2.8	9.9	5.8	13.3	7.1	13.8
Onley	5.8	9.4	5.3	8.9	6.0	9.3
Parkhurst	2.9	13.3	2.6	11.6	3.2	10.3
Pentonville	1.5	14.0	1.1	12.5	1.7	9.9
Portland	8.3	8.1	9.0	9.2	9.4	10.5
Preston	1.4	10.5	1.6	12.4	1.6	11.9
Ranby	5.5	19.6	4.6	20.0	5.3	21.2
Reading	2.3	10.5	2.5	12.4	4.6	14.4
Risley	4.6	14.6	4.8	15.0	6.2	16.7
Rochester	1.3	9.7	3.5	10.2	5.7	11.4
Send	5.8	22.7	4.9	21.8	4.4	22.2
Shepton Mallet	6.3	13.0	7.1	13.4	7.0	13.0
Shrewsbury	2.7	11.6	3.0	10.5	2.6	8.6
Stafford	4.7	16.0	4.5	16.8	4.3	18.4
Standford Hill	4.2	26.3	4.4	25.3	4.8	24.4
Stocken	6.6	13.3	7.3	14.5	7.7	18.4
Stoke Heath	4.6	11.6	5.1	14.1	4.7	14.4
Styal	6.3	17.8	5.9	19.3	6.9	21.9
Sudbury	6.9	17.5	7.7	16.4	8.3	17.8
Swaleside	5.6	11.2	4.7	10.4	4.9	10.2
Swansea	2.6	11.0	2.5	11.8	2.8	13.9
Swinfen Hall	8.3	11.1	7.9	11.9	9.9	13.4
Thorn Cross	12.8	10.1	12.7	8.8	12.6	19.3
Usk	9.1	16.8	8.8	18.5	9.1	17.8
Verne	7.4	19.8	7.2	20.1	8.1	18.5
Wakefield	3.8	11.7	3.9	11.6	4.1	13.4
Wandsworth	0.8	15.0	1.3	16.2	2.1	14.5
Wayland	6.1	11.4	7.2	10.8	8.3	11.8
Wealstun	7.1	15.5	7.9	15.9	9.1	15.2
Weare	4.1	9.3	—	—	—	—
Wellingborough	11.1	7.3	10.8	8.0	12.1	9.1
Werrington	10.2	18.2	11.3	18.3	12.7	18.1
Wetherby	10.3	9.6	11.6	11.8	12.4	13.1
Whatton	11.5	14.1	11.7	14.9	11.5	15.6
Whitemoor	4.3	10.1	5.0	11.3	5.8	9.8
Winchester	2.3	11.9	2.3	12.8	2.9	14.6
Wolds	9.5	12.8	—	—	—	—
Woodhill	2.9	6.8	3.2	7.2	3.5	7.6
Wormwood Scrubs	0.8	10.4	1.1	9.6	2.0	10.8
Wymott	3.7	26.3	4.4	24.5	4.6	27.3

Criminal Justice (Terrorism and Conspiracy) Act 1998

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to review those terms of the Criminal Justice (Terrorism and Conspiracy) Act 1998 which were not incorporated into the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1989, with special reference to the provisions relating to conspiracies other than terrorist conspiracies; and if he will make a statement. [67930]

Mr. Boateng: Section 8 of the Criminal Justice (Terrorism and Conspiracy) Act 1998 requires the Secretary of State to lay before the House at least once in every 12 months a report on the working of the Act. The provisions relating to conspiracy in sections 5–7 of the 1998 Act will be reviewed separately from the other provisions. The appointment of an independent reviewer of these provisions is currently under consideration and an announcement on the appointment will be made in due course.

Prisons

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the prisons he has jurisdiction for, setting out *(a)* the number of places the prisons were originally built for, *(b)* the number of inmates currently in each prison and *(c)* the percentage overcrowding. [67952]

Mr. George Howarth: The table lists the certified normal accommodation, population and percentage overcrowding at each prison establishment for which the Home Secretary has jurisdiction on 18 December 1998.

The Prison Service uses the concept of certified normal accommodation (CNA) to define the uncrowded capacity of each establishment. For prisons built in recent years, this is equivalent to original capacity. The CNA measures can also be applied to older prisons, particularly those built in the last century, whose original capacity is no longer relevant because of significant building and or modernisation work.

Certified normal accommodation, population and percentage overcrowding by prison on 18 December 1998

Establishment	*Certified normal accommodation*	*Population*	*Percentage overcrowding*
Acklington	662	651	—
Albany	436	427	—
Aldington	145	138	—
Altcourse	600	690	115
Ashwell	484	491	101

Certified normal accommodation, population and percentage overcrowding by prison on 18 December 1998

Establishment	Certified normal accommodation	Population	Percentage overcrowding
Askham Grange	130	127	—
Aylesbury	439	374	—
Bedford	352	373	106
Belmarsh	820	809	—
Birmingham	734	1,063	145
Blakenhurst	647	830	128
Blantyre House	120	119	—
Blundeston	424	346	—
Brinsford	477	490	103
Bristol	487	574	118
Brixton	809	728	—
Brockhill	145	145	100
Buckley Hall	350	383	109
Bullingdon	773	872	113
Bullwood Hall	140	132	—
Camphill	429	480	112
Canterbury	196	284	145
Cardiff	525	662	126
Castington	330	314	—
Channings Wood	482	598	124
Chelmsford	357	355	—
Coldingley	298	287	—
Cookham Wood	120	163	136
Dartmoor	701	651	—
Deerbolt	432	401	—
Doncaster	771	1,050	136
Dorchester	147	222	151
Dover	316	313	—
Downview	327	342	105
Drake Hall	295	269	—
Durham	592	890	150
East Sutton Park	94	85	—
Eastwood Park	255	270	106
Elmley	760	931	123
Erlestoke	310	310	100
Everthorpe	438	467	107
Exeter	314	487	155
Featherstone	599	596	—
Feltham	849	887	104
Ford	462	443	—
Foston Hall	130	132	102
Frankland	529	520	—
Full Sutton	584	595	102
Garth	633	646	102
Gartree	366	368	101
Glen Parva	720	836	116
Gloucester	235	293	125
Grendon	241	222	—
Guys Marsh	487	518	106
Haslar	160	155	—
Hatfield	180	157	—
Haverigg	530	546	103
Hewell Grange	203	198	—
Highdown	649	785	121
Highpoint	680	690	101
Hindley	494	440	—
Hollesley Bay	398	364	—
Holloway	517	520	101
Holme House	971	958	—
Hull	556	506	—
Huntercombe	368	368	100
Kingston	193	165	—
Kirkham	702	596	—
Kirklevgton	180	177	—
Lancaster	218	216	—
Lancaster Farms	496	465	—
Latchmere House	193	172	—
Leeds	1,056	1,232	117
Leicester	219	348	159
Lewes	485	478	—
Leyhill	410	377	—
Lincoln	350	441	126
Lindholme	686	681	—
Littlehey	624	641	103
Liverpool	1,216	1,473	121

Certified normal accommodation, population and percentage overcrowding by prison on 18 December 1998

Establishment	Certified normal accommodation	Population	Percentage overcrowding
Long Lartin	379	347	—
Low Newton	149	217	146
Lowdham Grange	504	498	—
Maidstone	551	569	103
Manchester	953	1,143	120
Moorland	740	767	104
Morton Hall	208	202	—
Mount	588	623	106
New Hall	327	367	112
North Sea Camp	197	181	—
Northallerton	152	250	164
Norwich	562	696	124
Nottingham	493	459	—
Onley	640	615	—
Parc	800	810	101
Parkhurst	482	393	—
Pentonville	897	1,091	122
Portland	516	576	112
Prescoed	120	87	—
Preston	398	679	171
Ranby	710	736	104
Reading	203	227	112
Risley	871	857	—
Rochester	433	381	—
Send	80	78	—
Shepton Mallet	162	217	134
Shrewsbury	166	298	180
Spring Hill	256	248	—
Stafford	627	623	—
Standford Hill	384	318	—
Stockken	556	576	104
Stoke Heath	646	613	—
Styal	412	282	—
Sudbury	511	510	100
Swaleside	632	622	—
Swansea	251	316	126
Swinfen Hall	319	293	—
Thron Cross	316	222	—
Usk	128	203	159
Verne	552	571	103
Wakefield	562	573	102
Wandsworth	1,171	1,300	111
Wayland	620	630	102
Wealstun	632	607	—
Weare	400	361	—
Wellingborough	368	328	—
Werrington	188	104	—
Wetherby	360	332	—
Whatton	267	263	—
Whitemoor	522	507	—
Winchester	463	609	132
Wolds	360	404	112
Woodhill	672	720	107
Wormwood Scrubs	946	967	102
Wymott	809	794	—

Police Officers (Early Retirement)

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many police officers have had their application for early retirement on health grounds refused during the past 12 months for each police authority in England and Wales; [67785]

(2) how many police officers have applied for early retirement on health grounds whose applications have not yet been determined for each police authority in England and Wales. [67786]

Mr. Boateng: The information is not held centrally.

Police Officers (Sick Leave)

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers currently on sick leave have had their pay *(a)* reduced by 50 per cent. and *(b)* stopped altogether for each police authority in England and Wales. [67787]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is not collected centrally, and can be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Police Officers (Years of Service)

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many and what percentage of police officers in post have more than 25 years' service for each police authority in England and Wales. [67789]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is not collected centrally, and can be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Greater London Police Authority

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the annual cost of the proposed new police authority for Greater London. [67791]

Kate Hoey: The Government have made no estimate of the annual cost of the proposed new police authority for London. In line with the position outside London, the costs of the Metropolitan Police Authority will be borne out of the budget it receives for the policing of the Metropolitan Police District.

Police Officers (Over 50)

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish a table showing *(a)* the number and *(b)* the percentage of officers in post aged 50 years and over for each police authority in England and Wales. [67788]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is not collected centrally, and can be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Police Pensions

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish a table showing the percentage of revenue budget apportioned to the payment of police pensions for each police authority in England and Wales. [67790]

Mr. Boateng: Estimates of police pension costs for 1998–99 are set out in the table.

Estimates of net police pension costs—1998–99

£000

Police authority	*Net pension costs*	*Net revenue expenditure*	*Percentage of net expenditure*
Avon and Somerset	26,877	167,417	16.1
Bedfordshire	6,982	62,317	11.2
Cambridgeshire	8,463	71,230	11.9
Cheshire	11,580	106,523	10.9
City of London	8,291	60,862	13.6
Cleveland	11,108	82,282	13.5
Cumbria	8,715	63,000	13.8
Derbyshire	13,788	100,894	13.7
Devon and Cornwall	23,165	167,117	13.9
Dorset	9,486	73,497	12.9
Durham	10,166	78,103	13.0
Dyfed Powys	6,926	52,609	13.2
Essex	19,361	168,889	11.5
Gloucestershire	9,138	63,780	14.3
Greater Manchester	59,380	371,497	16.0
Gwent	7,712	67,919	11.4
Hampshire	20,009	190,920	10.5
Hertfordshire	9,499	97,859	9.7
Humberside	13,584	111,587	12.2
Kent	20,867	178,916	11.7
Lancashire	24,802	178,051	13.9
Leicestershire	12,566	102,707	12.2
Lincolnshire	10,057	68,322	14.7
Merseyside	37,483	245,277	15.3
Metropolitan Police	210,438	1,778,001	11.8
Norfolk	10,148	82,339	12.3
North Wales	11,138	75,075	14.8
North Yorkshire	12,162	75,638	16.1
Northamptonshire	7,067	67,134	10.5
Northumbria	31,500	205,380	15.3
Nottinghamshire	16,355	124,828	13.1
South Wales	24,861	163,430	15.2
South Yorkshire	17,248	168,205	10.3
Staffordshire	22,383	122,540	18.3
Suffolk	8,385	65,785	12.7
Surrey	11,021	90,738	12.1
Sussex	24,846	162,664	15.3
Thames Valley Police	20,306	221,147	9.2
Warwickshire	6,201	53,617	11.6
West Mercia	12,458	112,879	11.0
West Midlands	42,831	372,296	11.5
West Yorkshire	37,555	280,739	13.4
Wiltshire	7,480	66,666	11.2
Total	924,388	7,220,676	12.8

Note:
Taken from the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy Police Statistics Estimates.

Police Escorts

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the cost in police time of escorting wide or exceptionally loaded vehicles for the last year for which figures are available for each police authority in England and Wales. [67792]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is not available centrally but it has been estimated by the Association of Chief Police Officers that the costs are over £7 million a year.

Plastic Bullets

Mr. Sedgemore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the review of the guidelines covering the use of plastic bullets will be completed; and when he will publish his conclusions. [67997]

Mr. Boateng: Consultation is continuing with the Association of Chief Police Officers and the Royal Ulster Constabulary about whether any changes to the current Home Office guidances covering the use of baton rounds in England and Wales are required. Any such change will be announced in due course.

Mr. Sedgemore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will take action to abolish the use of plastic bullets as a means of riot control in the United Kingdom. [67998]

Mr. Boateng: The use of baton rounds is one tactical option available to police in dealing with situations of serious public disorder. There are no plans to remove this option from the police service in England and Wales, for which the Home Secretary has responsibility.

MI5 (History)

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to make MI5's history of its operations from 1908 to 1945 available for commercial publication. [67981]

Mr. Straw: The Public Record Office released the first tranche of Security Service records relating to World War II on 27 January. Records relating to the period 1909–19 were released, in November 1997. The Security Service is reviewing the remaining records covering World War II and those for the inter-war years.

Once released by the Public Record Office, such records are in the public domain but may be subject to copyright in the usual way.

The Lord Chancellor's Advisory Council on Public Records, chaired by Lord Woolf, has recently conducted, at my request, a review of the criteria used by the Security Service in deciding whether to retain files on grounds of historical interest. I will be publishing their report and announcing my conclusions on their recommendations as soon as possible.

Commission for Racial Equality

Mr. Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the effectiveness and financial efficiency of the Commission for Racial Equality. [68186]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: A study of the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) was conducted by a senior Home Office official in July 1998 for budgetary purposes. This raised no serious concerns about the financial propriety of the CRE's expenditure of public money. It did, however, make recommendations to improve its business planning, including closer working links with the Home Office. Officials are in regular contact with the CRE and are taking these forward.

Mr. Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what date he met the former Commission for Racial Equality member, Mrs. Blondel Cluff; what detailed response he has made to the paper on the Commission for Racial Equality which she submitted to the Home Office; and if he will place a copy of his response to her paper in the Library. [68185]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I met Mrs. Cluff on 6 July 1998. At this meeting she passed me her report.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary wrote a private letter to Mrs. Cluff thanking her for her service on the Commission. In this he said that her points on the role and philosophy of the Commission would help inform the Government's thinking on the future shape for race relations legislation.

SCOTLAND

Spend-to-save Programme

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will detail by project of over £10,000 the moneys made available to local authorities under the spend-to-save programme for 1997–98; what projects have been earmarked for funding in (i) 1998–99 and (ii) 1999–2000, and how much funding has been allocated to each; what is the proposed total budget for the spend-to-save programme for each of the next three financial years; and what percentage of this will be under the control of the Scottish Parliament. [65935]

Mr. McLeish *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The spend-to-save scheme was introduced in 1997–1998 to allow councils flexibility between capital and revenue spending to deal with costs arising from reductions in revenue budgets. The spend-to-save initiatives and the amount of capital allocations surrendered for the purpose are entirely a matter for individual authorities. £37.3 million and £12.171 million was used in 1997–98 and 1998–99 respectively for spend-to-save purposes. There are no plans to continue the scheme beyond this year. From 1 July, local government finance will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

New Futures Fund

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will provide a breakdown of allocations of money over £10,000 made under the New Futures Fund in the financial year 1997–98; if he will list the allocations over £10,000 already made under this programme for financial years 1998–99 and 1999–2000; if he will give *(a)* the amount allocated to running costs and *(b)* the total funds available for each of the next three financial years; and what percentage of this will be under the control of the Scottish Parliament. [65800]

Mr. Dewar *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The operational management of the New Futures Fund (NFF) is the responsibility of Scottish Enterprise (SE) and Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) and I will ask their Chairmen to write to the hon. Member. The funding for the NFF is provided from within the financial allocations made to SE and HIE and as such will be under the control of the Scottish Parliament.

Performance Pool Awards

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will give the percentage of the NHS performance pool money announced by his Department on 18 March 1998 for NHS trusts which met waiting list targets which has been allocated; if he will give the value of such money distributed to each health trust; what criteria were used to make awards; and if he will publish the target levels for waiting lists for each health trust and the actual current level of waiting list. [65807]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* No allocations have yet been made from the money set aside to reward good performance by NHS Trusts in reducing waiting lists. The target levels for waiting lists reductions are held at Health Board level and are given in Table A. Waiting lists figures, by Health Board, at 30 September 1998 are set out in Table B. Waiting lists data, by Health

Board, is published quarterly, and the figures for 31 December 1998 are not yet available. From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Table A: NHS in Scotland: Waiting lists to be met by 31 March 1999, by Health Board

Health Board	*Target*
Argyll and Clyde	7,304
Ayrshire and Arran	6,113
Borders	1,565
Dumfries and Galloway	2,290
Fife	7,732
Forth Valley	4,308
Grampian	8,757
Greater Glasgow	13,307
Highland	3,380
Lanarkshire	9,525
Lothian	11,874
Orkney	184
Shetland	379
Tayside	7,336
Western Isles	450

Table B: NHS in Scotland: Inpatient and day case waiting list, by Health Board, on 30 September 1998

Health Board	*Number waiting*
Argyll and Clyde	7,083
Ayrshire and Arran	5,916
Borders	1,497
Dumfries and Galloway	2,137
Fife	8,109
Forth Valley	4,030
Grampian	9,583
Greater Glasgow	13,738
Highland	3,403
Lanarkshire	9,264
Lothian	10,701
Orkney	213
Shetland	413
Tayside	8,252
Western Isles	419

Source:
SMR3, ISD Scotland

NHS Building Projects

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the current building projects in the NHS, with the exception of Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, of value greater than £100,000; which of these involve PFI contracts and what is the PFI share of the cost of each project; what will be the *(a)* annual cost and *(b)* total cost to the public purse of each of these projects over the next five years, stating the amounts to be paid under PFI contracts; if he will list the property transfers made as part of the PFI contracts in each case; which of these buildings will be in public ownership; and if he will make a statement. [65933]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* Other than the new Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh, there are currently 35 building projects with a capital value greater than £100,000 under way in the NHSiS. These projects are listed as follows:

Aberdeen Royal Infirmary Service Reconfiguration

Arbroath Infirmary Redevelopment

Arran Day Hospital, Ailsa Hospital, Ayr

Ashludie Community Hospital

Bo'ness Community Hospital

Borders Mental Health Renewal Programme

Crosshouse Hospital Service Developments

Cumbernauld Health Centre

Dumfries Community Extended Treatment Unit

Dundee Dental Hospital Upgrade

Dundee Limb Fitting Centre

Dundee Palliative Care Day Hospital

Edinburgh Western General Redevelopment

3 Health Care Houses, Edinburgh

Galashiels Health Centre

Glasgow Royal Infirmary Maternity and Plastic Surgery Development

Glasgow Southern General Neuroscience Ward Upgrade

Glasgow Southern General Prosthetics Unit

Glasgow Western General Infectious Diseases Unit

Glasgow Western General Linear Accelerator Bunkers

GP Premises in Orkney

Hairmyres Hospital (DGH Replacement)

IPCU and ICCU at St. John's, Livingston

Law Hospital (DGH Replacement)

Learning Disabilities Nursing Home, Edinburgh

Lerwick Health Centre

Old Irvine Road Clinic, Kilmarnock

Renal Endoscopy Unit at Monklands Hospital

Scalloway Health Centre

Southern Isles Hospital, Balivanich

Special Care Baby Unit at Ninewells, Dundee

Stranraer Resource Centre

Turriff Hospital

Waverley Park, Glasgow

Woodilee Hospital Reprovision.

In addition, there may be other projects which fall within NHS Trust and Health Board delegated limits and for which information is not held centrally.

Of these projects two are being procured through PFI, namely, the new Hairmyres Hospital and the new Law Hospital. The capital value of the facilities being procured through these projects is £67.5 million for Hairmyres Hospital and £100 million for Law Hospital. The facilities will be designed, built, financed and operated by the private sector and the NHS Trusts will enter into 25 to 30 year contracts for the use of the facilities.

NHS Trusts pay capital charges (depreciation and a return on capital employed) on all publicly owned assets which they use. For facilities provided through the PFI, no capital charges will be paid but the Trust will instead pay the private sector provider for the use of the facility.

No payments will be made to the PFI provider or costs incurred prior to the facility coming into use. Over the next 5 years the total running costs of the facility (including the cost of the PFI contract) and the PFI contract costs will be as detailed in the table.

£000

Year	New Hairmyres hospital Total running cost	New Hairmyres hospital PFI contract	New Law hospital Total running cost	New Law hospital PFI contract
1999–2000	0	0	0	0
2000–01	0	0	0	0
2001–02	50,545	10,554	61,356	16,145
2002–03	44,694	12,530	74,409	19,579
2003–04	44,563	12,399	76,641	20,166
Total	139,802	35,483	212,406	55,890

As part of the PFI contract for the new Hairmyres Hospital 52 acres of surplus land at Hairmyres was included in the deal. No land transfers were included in the Law deal.

Neither of the new facilities will be in public ownership.

School Rationalisations

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list by project of over £10,000 the moneys made available to local authorities for school rationalisations for the financial year 1997–98; what projects have been earmarked for funding in financial years 1998–99 and 1999–2000; how much funding has been allocated to each; what is the proposed total budget for school rationalisations for each of the next three financial years; and what percentage of this will be under the control of the Scottish Parliament. [65930]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* Under special arrangements, which apply only for financial year 1998–99, £15 million has been distributed to the eight authorities listed to assist them in improving the facilities and buildings at schools involved in rationalisation plans in their areas. The distribution of the resources is not tied to specific rationalisation projects. It is, of course, open to authorities to allocate funds from their general capital resources in support of school rationalisation. From 1 July 1999, local government finance, including local authorities' responsibilities for schools funding will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Authorities	£000
Aberdeen City	525
Argyll and Bute	440
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar	87
Dundee City	460
East Ayrshire	643
Glasgow City	12,000
South Lanarkshire	485
West Lothian	360

New Housing Partnership

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will provide a breakdown of allocations of money over £10,000 made under the New Housing Partnership in the financial year 1997–98 indicating allocations over £10,000 already made under the New Housing Partnership for financial years 1998–99 and 1999–2000, and further indicating *(a)* the amount allocated to running costs and *(b)* the total funds available for each of the next three financial years. [65954]

Mr. Macdonald *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The information is contained in the table.

New Housing Partnership Allocations

£000

Councils	1997–98	1998–99
Aberdeen City	367	330
Aberdeenshire	223	65
Angus	190	—
Argyll and Bute	207	—
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar	146	56
Clackmannanshire	157	780
Dumfries and Galloway	276	100
Dundee City	424	3,275
East Ayrshire	306	1,261
East Dunbartonshire	181	68
East Lothian	186	2,945
East Renfrewshire	157	25
Edinburgh City	731	7,718
Falkirk	360	200
Fife	175	125
Glasgow City	1,578	9,415
Highland	306	992
Inverclyde	241	33
Midlothian	190	—
Moray	162	20
North Ayrshire	249	82
North Lanarkshire	718	1,752
Orkney Islands	120	—
Perth and Kinross	231	187
Renfrewshire	371	93
Scottish Borders	167	135
Shetland Island	127	200
South Ayrshire	247	—
South Lanarkshire	436	750
Stirling	211	311
West Dunbartonshire	285	15
West Lothian	272	2,630

Allocations for New Housing Partnership projects have still to be made over the three years from 1999. It is not possible to differentiate between capital and running costs. Earmarked sums for each of the three years are:

	£ million
1999–2000	23
2000–2001	95
2001–2002	160

From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

NHS Modernisation Programme

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will provide a breakdown of allocations of money over £10,000 made under the modernisation programme for the NHS in Scotland announced on 5 November 1998 for financial years 1998–99 and 1999–2000; and if he will give the total funds available for each of the next three financial years. [65810]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The Modernisation Programme comes into effect from April 1999. No allocations have therefore, been made in

1998–99. £140 million is being made available for the modernisation programme in 1999–2000. The level of funds to be made available in 2000–01 and 2001–02 has still to be determined. Allocations for 1999–2000 have been made as follows:

	£ million
Waiting list initiative	44.5
Bridging finance	12.5
GP staff and premises	2.5
Blood products etc.	13.8
Support for local health co-operatives	13.5

The balance of funds will be distributed over the next financial year. From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Project Funding Allocation

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list broken down by year and amount for each of the next three financial years those projects of value greater than £50,000 which have been allocated funds from the money announced by press release by his Department on 17 March 1998; and what percentage of the money remains unallocated. [65806]

Mr. Dewar *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The Scottish Office issued three news releases on 17 March 1998 about public expenditure allocations announcing an additional £44 million for the NHS in Scotland; £21 million of additional funding for education; and an increase of £4.5 million in funding for rural transport. From 1 July 1999 these will be matters for the Scottish Parliament. The information requested in relation to each of these is as follows:

Health

An additional £44.5 million has been added to the baseline of the NHS in Scotland specifically to tackle waiting lists.

In 1999–2000, Health Boards will use these resources to provide full funding for 196 strategic projects established during the current year and designed to secure long-term, sustained reductions in waiting lists and waiting times. The Boards will be monitoring and auditing the progress and success of these projects and will allocate funding to them in 2000–01 and in subsequent years, as appropriate. I have arranged for a list, by Health Board, of the 104 projects which will cost in excess of £50,000 in 1999–2000 to be placed in the Library.

Education

Additional spending of £19 million for schools and child care was provided to local authorities in the current year under the normal allocation arrangements. Details are not available at this time of individual projects undertaken by those authorities. Additional funding of £1.4 million for further education was directed to colleges to assist in the transitional period following a change in funding methodology. No specific projects were involved in this allocation. Funding announced for the University for Industry (£880,000) will be utilised for the continued development costs of the project.

Rural Transport

£4.5 million per year for three years is being invested in the Rural Transport Funding Package. In 1998–99 £3.5 million has been earmarked for allocation to local authorities to provide additional public passenger transport services; it is for the local authorities to decide which public transport services they intend to fund and information about projects greater than £50,000 is not held centrally. The Scottish Office has issued 75 per cent. of the funding for this financial year; the remaining 25 per cent. is expected to be issued in the near future.

A further £600,000 has been earmarked in this financial year for community transport projects. The three community transport projects awarded grant amounts greater than £50,000, and the spread of payments over the three financial years involved, are listed in the table.

Rural community transport projects greater than £50,000

£

	1998–99	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*Total*
Annandale Community Transport Project	70,900	6,750	10,020	87,670
Handicabs (Mid/East Lothian)	31,500	15,000	15,000	61,500
Handicabs (West Lothian)	31,500	15,000	15,000	61,500

Grants of £240,000 to Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) and £160,000 to Scottish Enterprise (SE) have been allocated to assist rural petrol stations in 1989–99. Decisions about the specific allocation of grant for individual projects are a matter for HIE, SE and the relevant Local Enterprise Companies.

100 per cent. of the grant to local authorities for rural public passenger transport services and grant to assist rural petrol stations remains to be allocated in future years. 90 per cent. of the funding for rural community transport grant schemes remains available for allocation in future years.

Research and Development

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will detail by project of over £10,000 and in total, the assistance given to Scottish businesses for research and development in 1997–98; what projects have been earmarked for funding in (i) 1998–99 and (ii) 1999–2000, and how much funding has been allocated to each; what is the proposed budget for research and development assistance for each of the next three financial years; and what percentage of this will be under the control of the Scottish Parliament. [65934]

Mr. Dewar *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* My Department provides research and development support for business through the SMART: SCOTLAND, SPUR and SPUR^{plus} programmes, during 1997–98 and the current financial year also made payments to projects which are funded under the Regional Enterprise Grant for Innovation Scheme (which closed to applications on 31 December 1995).

The European Commission, other Government Departments, including the Department of Trade and Industry and the Ministry of Defence, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the local enterprise companies are also actively involved in assisting projects which fall within their spheres of responsibility. Information on these latter categories of grants is not held by my Department.

Total grant expenditure in 1997–98 on projects supported under SMART: SCOTLAND, SPUR, SPUR^{plus} and Regional Enterprise Grant for Innovation Scheme amounted to £3.6 million. During the period 1 April 1998 to 31 December 1998 the equivalent expenditure amounted to £2.5 million. As details of how this expenditure is broken down between individual projects

of over £10,000 and of the funding allocated is lengthy, I have arranged for this information to be placed in the House Library.

No specific projects have been earmarked for funding in 1999–2000 and in the remainder of the current financial year since grant offers are made in response to project proposals submitted to my Department by businesses which meet the qualifying criteria for support.

The combined provision for SMART: SCOTLAND, SPUR and SPUR[plus] in each of the next three financial years is £4.3 million. From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Scottish Parliament Building

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has had with the architect Enric Miralles on *(a)* the estimated date of completion of the Scottish Parliament's new building and *(b)* the cost overrun on the project. [66706]

Mr. McLeish *[holding answer 21 January 1999]:* I and officials in the Holyrood Parliament Project Team have regular contact and meetings with Enric Miralles of EMBT/RMJM on a range of issues about the new building at Holyrood. The project remains on programme and the budget for the building continues to be £50 million excluding VAT and fees.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment he has made of the allegations made by the project manager for the Scottish Parliament's new building that he was prevented from taking the action necessary to solve problems of building cost overrun. [66704]

Mr. McLeish *[holding answer 21 January 1999]:* Comprehensive project monitoring and reporting arrangements are in place for the Holyrood building. The allegations attributed to the former project manager have been examined. I am satisfied that the project remains on programme. The budget for the building continues to be £50 million excluding VAT and fees.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what were the criteria used in calculating the initial estimated building cost for the Scottish Parliament; and what factors have led to an increase in cost since that estimate. [66703]

Mr. McLeish *[holding answer 21 January 1999]:* The initial calculation of the estimated building cost for the Scottish Parliament new building was carried out by independent cost consultants. It was based on the feasibility studies produce for the four sites originally considered for the Scottish Parliament building. Appropriate unit rates were applied for different categories of use reflecting the need for varying standards of finish across the building.

Detailed design work is being carried out by the architects for the building and cost consultants to monitor the implications. The budget for the building remains £50 million excluding VAT and fees.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what reports he has received from the project manager of the Scottish Parliament's new building as to the prospects for the building being completed on time. [66705]

Mr. McLeish *[holding answer 21 January 1999]:* Arrangements are in place whereby I and officials in the Holyrood Parliament Project Team receive regular information about progress against programme for the Holyrood building. Work on site has begun and the target date for completion continues to be autumn 2001.

Departmental Papers (Access for Visually Impaired)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has for departmental *(a)* White and *(b)* Green Papers to be made available on floppy disk format in a form which facilitates access for the visually impaired. [67845]

Mr. Dewar: All Scottish Office White and Green Papers are published on my Department's web site and can be easily accessed in large type face.

I also refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to him by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office on 27 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *296*.

Motorail Service

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will take steps to assist the proposed revival of the Motorail service to take to their destinations by rail the cars of visitors to Scotland or of Scottish residents visiting southern England or the continent. [66632]

Mr. Dewar *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* This is a private commercial venture and its success will depend on demand for the service. I understand that the company has been seeking assistance from various sources, including Scottish Enterprise, local enterprise companies in the Highlands and the Scottish Tourist Board. Any project which seeks to take traffic off the roads is commendable and I will continue to watch the progress of this proposal with interest. From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Student Fees

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what estimate he has made of the income to be raised by fees paid by students at Scottish universities and colleges in the current year and each of the next five years. [67501]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 27 January 1999]:* Fees income for Scottish universities and colleges has been estimated for the years 1998–99—2001–02 only. Current estimates are set out in the table.

Academic Year	*£ million*[1]
1998–99	19
1999–00	32
2000–01	41
2001–02	46

[1] All figures at current prices

From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Boundary Commission

Mr. Russell Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the members of the Boundary Commission for Scotland. [68571]

Mr. Dewar: I have appointed Dr. Elspeth Graham and Professor Gavin McCrone to the Boundary Commission for Scotland from 1 January 1999 to 31 December 2002.

The other members of the Commission are:

Madam Speaker—ex officio—Chairman;

The hon. Lady Cosgrove, appointed as Deputy Chairman by the Lord President of the Court of Session from 1 January 1997 to 31 December 1999.

Caesarean Births

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list, for each of the last 10 years, the percentage of live births delivered by caesarean section within each health authority in Scotland. [67671]

Mr. Galbraith: The information requested is as follows:

Live births (singleton and multiple)—Scotland

Percentage delivered by caesarean section, year ending 31 March

Health board—area of treatment	*1989*	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
Scotland	14.4	14.6	15.2	15.1	15.8	16.0	16.5	16.8	17.5	18.5
Argyll and Clyde	16.9	16.2	17.4	16.9	15.7	15.4	16.2	18.0	18.3	21.0
Ayrshire and Arran	15.5	16.3	18.2	17.2	17.9	18.2	17.5	18.8	19.1	20.4
Borders	14.0	13.6	17.9	15.7	16.1	16.5	16.0	19.4	20.9	17.6
Dumfries and Galloway	11.2	12.3	14.1	12.5	16.9	15.6	11.7	13.7	14.8	17.8
Fife	11.3	11.6	10.7	10.9	11.6	13.3	15.2	15.4	14.9	19.0
Forth Valley	12.7	12.7	13.8	14.8	15.2	13.7	15.8	13.6	15.3	16.7
Grampian	11.8	12.5	12.4	11.8	13.0	14.7	15.4	15.4	17.4	18.2
Greater Glasgow	15.3	16.3	16.4	17.0	17.8	16.9	18.0	17.3	18.1	18.1
Highland	14.6	13.2	13.7	15.2	17.9	15.6	16.4	18.0	17.9	19.9
Lanarkshire	14.7	14.8	16.1	15.9	16.6	17.5	17.8	17.7	18.4	19.2
Lothian	15.5	14.9	15.1	15.3	16.1	16.8	16.7	17.4	17.5	18.6
Orkney	14.2	8.3	9.0	7.8	10.6	13.7	12.2	11.7	16.9	13.6
Shetland	7.3	9.1	2.2	7.1	8.1	6.4	4.7	2.5	2.9	5.3
Tayside	13.6	14.3	14.6	12.9	13.4	14.7	15.7	16.3	16.4	16.3
Western Isles	10.2	9.7	19.3	18.1	19.1	18.3	18.3	19.3	19.0	18.1

Notes:

1. Prior to 1998, birth details were recorded only for the first two babies delivered. From 1998, where four or more babies are involved in a delivery, birth details are recorded for the first three babies delivered.
2. In multiple deliveries individual babies may have different modes of delivery.

Source:

The information shown in the table has been extracted from the Scottish Morbidity Record (SMR02)—Maternity discharge.

From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Pesticides

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what is the current number of pesticides approved for use in the UK; and how many have *(a)* full approval and *(b)* provisional approval; [66011]

(2) how many of the pesticides in use in the UK which have only provisional approval have had this status for *(a)* one to three years, *(b)* three to five years and *(c)* more than five years; and if he will make a statement. [66010]

Mr. Rooker: Pesticide approvals for agricultural products are issued by the Pesticides Safety Directorate (PSD); approvals for other products are issued by the Health and Safety Executive. A total of 3,905 pesticide products were, at 1 January 1999, approved by PSD. Of these, 1,871 had full approval for at least one use; 2,034 had provisional approval.

Pesticides may have more than one approval, each approval reflecting a different use. The 2,034 pesticides carrying provisional approval from the PSD had a total of 3,668 specific approvals on 1 January 1999. The age profile of these approvals was:

Less than one year: 1,182

One to three years: 1,735

Three to five years: 408

More than five years: 343.

I have asked the Pesticides Safety Directorate to look closely at the reasons for the continuation of provisional approvals beyond three years to ensure that the highest standards of safety are being maintained.

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment the Pesticides Safety Directorate has made of the safety of the use of pesticides in school grounds and playing fields. [66009]

Mr. Rooker: All pesticides, including those for use in school grounds and playing fields, are subject to strict statutory control. In considering the approval or review of a pesticide for use on amenity turf (including school playing fields and grounds), an assessment is made of the risk to people exposed to the treated area. Only if this assessment shows that there is no unacceptable risk to children and adults from the treatment will approval be granted or allowed to continue. Detailed advice covering the use of pesticides in such areas is set out in the Code of Practice for the Use of Approved Pesticides in Amenity and Industrial Areas (the Orange Code), produced by the British Agrochemicals Association and the National

Association of Agricultural Contractors. This Code has my full support as a contribution to good practice and safe use.

Mite Contamination

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the member states of the European Union which have set maximum levels for mite contamination in food. [66018]

Mr. Rooker: No member state of the European Union has legislation which specifically sets maximum levels for mite contamination in food.

Organic Farming

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which organisations have been commissioned by his Department to operate the Organic Conversion Information Scheme in the United Kingdom; for which parts of the service these organisations are responsible; and if he will make a statement on the current level of interest in the scheme. [67659]

Mr. Morley: The Organic Conversion Information Services operates in England and Wales and is funded by the relevant Agriculture Departments. It comprises a telephone "Helpline" operated by the Soil Association and free on-farm advisory visits provided by the Elm Farm Research Centre. On-farm visits are also made by ADAS in Wales.

In Scotland, the Scottish Agricultural College is responsible for a telephone "Helpline". The advisory service in Northern Ireland is provided by the Department of Agriculture.

There was a significant increase in the number of inquiries received during 1998 and so far in 1999 throughout the UK.

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the relative *(a)* direct and *(b)* indirect (1) subsidies afforded to and (2) energy used by (i) organic and (ii) conventional agriculture; and if he will make a statement. [67716]

Mr. Morley: In common with farmers who pursue conventional farming methods, organic farmers benefit from general support delivered under the Common Agricultural Policy, largely through the commodity regimes. They may also claim support under the Organic Aid Scheme and, where eligible, certain other agri-environmental schemes. An assessment of direct energy costs in agriculture is made as part of the annual estimates of agricultural incomes prepared by the Ministry. This assessment does not, however, distinguish between organic and conventional agriculture. Such a comparison would need to be statistically sound to be of value. The current diversity and small scale of many organic farming enterprises would, therefore, restrict the value of any statistical comparisons.

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the amount of farmland *(a)* converted, *(b)* under conversion and *(c)* considering conversion to organic farming; and if he will make a statement on the estimated trend and geographical spread. [67692]

Mr. Morley: As at 31 December 1998, there were 25,158 ha of converted organic land and 18,712 ha of land in conversion, in England. It is not possible reliably to estimate the amount of farmland being considered for conversion but there is a heightened level of interest from prospective organic farmers as evidenced by a substantial increase in inquiries received by the Organic Conversion Information Service. The south and west of England have a proportionally higher number of organic producers than the rest of England.

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is his Department's research budget for 1999; how much will be allocated to organic farming systems; how the organic research budget is allocated; and how his Department ensures that research is *(a)* co-ordinated, *(b)* not duplicating other work and *(c)* meeting the needs of the organic sector. [67712]

Mr. Morley: MAFF's research budget for 1999–2000 has not been finalised but it is likely to be in order of £127m. £2.1m will be allocated to organic farming. The organic farming research budget is allocated by the Ministry's Organic Farming Unit and the Chief Scientist's Group with advice from the Farming and Rural Conservation Agency, and taking account of the recommendations of the UKROFS R&D Committee.

There are a number of mechanisms to ensure that the research is well co-ordinated, not duplicatory, and meets the needs of the organic sector. These include maintaining awareness of other research, the frequent inclusion of literature and research reviews within the programme, consultation with the UKROFS R&D Committee, the periodic in-depth review of the programme involving external referees, and the fact that much of the research is let by Open Competition.

Crops Support

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to provide support for crops on *(a)* grassland and *(b)* other agricultural land; and if he will make a statement. [67730]

Mr. Rooker: Support for a range of arable crops, including cereals and oilseeds crops, is provided under the Common Agricultural Policy. This takes a number of forms including direct payments to farmers. In some cases the relevant EU regulations restrict the type of land on which these may be paid. If the hon. Member writes to me with details of the specific crops in which he is interested, I will give him a fuller reply.

Genetically Modified Crops

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what public protection measures he has put in place in respect of the trials of genetically modified crops. [67768]

Mr. Meale: I have been asked to reply.

The release of genetically modified organisms to the environment is controlled by the Genetically Modified Organisms (Deliberate Release) Regulations 1992 (amended in 1995 and 1997) which give effect to Part VI of the Environmental Protection Act 1990. Under these regulations, no genetically modified organisms may be released to the environment without prior consent from

the Secretary of State. Consent will only be granted when the potential risks to human health and the environment have been avoided or minimised.

Departmental Staff (Travel)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the mileage rates currently applicable to staff, indicating changes which have been made to encourage staff to switch from cars to public transport and other less polluting forms of travel. [67491]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* The standard mileage rates reimbursed to staff in the core-Department together with the Centre for Environmental Fisheries and Aquaculture Agency, the Central Science Laboratory Agency, the Farming and Rural Conservation Agency, the Pesticides Safety Directorate, the Veterinary Laboratories Agency and the Veterinary Medicines Directorate are set out in the following table:

Pence per mile

Engine size	*Up to 5,000 miles*	*Over 5,000 miles*
Up to 1,500cc	36	24
1,501–2,000cc	45	28
Over 2,000cc	48	37

The Department has strict rules to ensure that any travel on official business is authorised only when it is absolutely necessary and that cars may be used only when they are the most cost-effective method of travel. However, many of the Department's customers are based in rural locations so that the public transport options are often curtailed.

Different mileage rates apply within the Meat Hygiene Service Agency and I have asked the Chief Executive to reply directly.

Letter from Johnston McNeill to Mr. Norman Baker, dated January 1999:

As Chief Executive of the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) your question to the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food enquiring about the mileage rate currently applicable to staff and indicating the changes which have been made to encourage staff to switch from cars to public transport and other less polluting forms of transport has been passed to me to reply as regards this Executive Agency.

The MHS applies the following mileage rates:

	Mileage rates
Essential car user	
Lump Sum per annum	£783
Per mile, first 10,000 miles	34.9p per mile
Per mile, after 10,000 miles	13.3p per mile
Casual car user	
Per mile, first 10,000 miles	44.1p per mile
Per mile, after 10,000 miles	13.3p per mile
Leased Cars	9.3p per mile

The majority of MHS car users are operational staff who are responsible for supervising MHS plant-based staff at some 1,600 licensed fresh meat premises scattered across Great Britain. Many licensed premises are situated in outlying areas where public transport is not available. The use of cars is therefore essential for MHS staff to carry out their duties.

I can assure you that the MHS does encourage the use of public transport wherever it is practical.

Badgers

Mrs. Organ: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what action he proposes to take in response to the recommendations of the Standing Committee of the Berne Convention on the badger culling trial. [68778]

Mr. Nick Brown: The badger is not an endangered species in this country. We give it statutory protection which goes well beyond what the Berne Convention requires. However tuberculosis is a serious disease of cattle (and humans and badgers). We have carried out a thorough scientific review and a wide public consultation. We have thus carefully explored the possible solutions for the effective control of bovine TB. We have suspended badger culling throughout most of Great Britain, but have reluctantly concluded that we must test its effectiveness as one part of a broad strategy, which includes vaccine research, as well as checks on other wildlife species for TB. We therefore intend to continue the trial and will explain to the Standing Committee why this action is fully consistent with the provisions of the Berne Convention.

Horse and Pony Exports

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans are being made to block the export of live horses and ponies to Ireland for subsequent export to Europe for slaughter. [67871]

Mr. Morley: Various rules are in force to protect the welfare of horses and ponies being transported from Great Britain. We attach importance to enforcing these rules, and would promptly investigate any hard evidence that they were being broken.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Travel Advice

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what changes to Foreign Office travel advice have been made since 20 December 1998. [66943]

Mr. Fatchett: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office issues Travel Advice notices on over 130 countries worldwide and updates them on a regular basis. Many of them have been updated since 20 December.

British Citizens (Overseas Prisons)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many British nationals are currently imprisoned overseas; and if he will provide a breakdown by country. [66946]

Mr. Fatchett: The number of British nationals imprisoned overseas (as at 22 January 1999) is 2,266. A breakdown by country is as follows:

Country	*Number of prisoners*
Antigua	3
Argentina	6
Australia	93
Austria	23
Bahamas	4
Bahrain	8
Bali	1
Bangladesh	3
Barbados	7
Belgium	81
Belize	1
Bolivia	2
Brazil	18
Brunei	1
Bulgaria	5
Cambodia	1
Canada	22
Cayman Islands	1
China	20
CIS	2
Colombia	5
Croatia	1
Cuba	6
Cyprus	6
Czech Republic	4
Dem. Rep. Congo	3
Denmark	23
Djibouti	2
Dominican Republic	4
Ecuador	10
Egypt	1
Estonia	1
Finland	2
France	321
Germany	109
Gibraltar	1
Greece	13
Grenada	3
Guatemala	1
Guinea	4
Guyana	1
Hong Kong	19
Hungary	2
Iceland	1
India	35
Indonesia	8
Iran	4
Ireland	35
Israel	5
Italy	26
Jamaica	28
Japan	18
Jordan	1
Kenya	2
Korea	3
Kuwait	5
Laos	1
Luxembourg	2
Malawi	1
Malaysia	2
Malta	1
Mauritius	2
Mexico	4
Morocco	31
Mozambique	1
Nepal	4
Netherlands	82
Neth. Antilles	1
New Zealand	5
Nigeria	1
Norway	18
Oman	1
Pakistan	13
Panama	1
Peru	9
Philippines	27
Poland	2
Portugal	28
Qatar	11
Romania	1
Rwanda	1
Saudi Arabia	3
Sierra Leone	3
Singapore	19
South Africa	27
Spain	305
Sri Lanka	7
St. Lucia	7
Sweden	31
Switzerland	21
Syria	2
Taiwan	9
Tanzania	1
Thailand	151
Trinidad	4
Tunisia	1
Turkey	7
UAE	26
Uganda	2
Uruguay	1
USA	344
Uzbekistan	1
Venezuela	11
Vietnam	10
Yemen	6
Zimbabwe	2

East Timor

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to raise comments made by the Defence Attaché to the Indonesian Embassy about the use of British military exports in East Timor with the Indonesian Government. [67603]

Mr. Fatchett: In July 1997, we introduced new criteria for the export of defence equipment. Since then we have not issued licences for the export of equipment where we judge that there is clearly identifiable risk that the equipment might be used for internal repression or international aggression.

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he will take to ensure Indonesian compliance with UN resolutions on East Timor. [67575]

Mr. Fatchett: We fully support the efforts of the UN Secretary-General in searching for a fair, comprehensive and internationally acceptable solution to the problem. We keep in regular contact with the Secretary-General and Ambassador Marker about the progress of talks on East Timor.

EU Fifth Framework Programme

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the UK Government policy on Israel's participation in the Fifth Framework Programme. [67405]

Ms Quin: We see value in Israel's participation in the Fifth Framework Programme. Given recent events in the region, however, we understand the concerns of our EU partners that now is not the right time to decide the issue. We hope this can be resolved as soon as circumstances permit.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the EU Council of Ministers will discuss the possible participation of Israel in the Fifth Framework Programme of research. [67404]

Ms Quin: EU Ministers looked at this issue at the GAC on 27–28 April 1998. There are no plans at present to discuss this further at Ministerial level in the EU.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what other non-EU member states are being considered for participation in the Fifth Framework Programme. [67407]

Ms Quin: The countries being considered for full Associated Membership of the Fifth Framework Programme are: the ten Central and Eastern European countries and Cyprus (which have applied for EU membership); Israel and Switzerland.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with other EU member states on Israel's participation in the Fifth Framework Programme; and what views they have expressed. [67406]

Ms Quin: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary discussed the Fifth Framework Programme with EU colleagues in the Council in April 1998. There is consensus among EU partners that no decision on Israel's participation in the programme should be taken now.

India (Gujarati Christians)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with representatives of the Indian Government about the treatment of Christians in the Gujarat. [67883]

Mr. Fatchett: We have made clear to the Indian authorities our concern over attacks on members of minority communities. I raised the issue with the Indian Home Minister in November last year. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I separately raised our concerns with the Indian National Security Adviser on 20 January.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received on the treatment of Christians in the Gujarat. [67882]

Mr. Fatchett: We have had representations from religious and other organisations.

Migration and Visa Correspondence Unit

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many *(a)* telephone inquiries and *(b)* letters the Migration and Visa Correspondence Unit received in December 1998. [67884]

Mr. Fatchett: Complete figures for December 1998 for telephone calls to the Migration and Visa Correspondence Unit (MVCU) are not available. 959 calls were received on the main public inquiry line. In addition several hundred calls were received on the Unit's other lines.

The MVCU received 738 letters in December 1998 of which 582 were from hon. Members.

Indonesia

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what actions he *(a)* has taken in the last two years and *(b)* plans to take on human rights issues in Aceh, Indonesia. [67403]

Mr. Fatchett: We continue to monitor events in Aceh and are in close contact with local NGOs including the Indonesia National Human Rights Commission (KomnasHam), who sent a team to Aceh earlier this month to investigate recent incidents. Our Embassy in Jakarta makes periodic visits to different parts of Indonesia, including Aceh, to assess the situation on the ground. We have made clear to the Indonesians our view that peace and reconciliation in Aceh will only be possible if past military abuses in the province are fully investigated and those responsible are made accountable for their actions.

WALES

Abattoirs

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what steps he is taking to safeguard the future of small abattoirs in Wales. [66157]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The slaughtering industry has been going through a substantial period of change. There is still over capacity in the industry and it is principally for commercial operators to consider how they respond to these changes.

However, the Government's decision to cover the costs of Specified Risk Material (SRM) Inspections for this financial year will benefit the industry in Wales by an estimated £2.8 million in 1998–99.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Regional Assistance

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is the timescale for the conclusion of his review of the regional assistance map of Wales; and what is his anticipated timescale for legislative changes arising from the review. [67100]

Mr. Hain: The Commission has asked Member States to submit their map proposals for scrutiny by 31 March 1999. The new maps will come into force on 1 January 2000.

Laying the statutory instrument to bring the new Assisted Areas into operation is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.

Organic Farming

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what financial provision his Department has made for the expected growth in the number of farmers converting to organic farming through the organic aid scheme; and if he will make a statement on whether the organic aid scheme budget is expected to cope with the current level of demand and expected growth in Wales. [67747]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Decisions on the funding of the Organic Aid Scheme have not yet been made.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will estimate the amount of farmland *(a)* converted, *(b)* under conversion and *(c)* considering conversion to organic; what assessment he has made of future trends in this area; and if he will make a statement on the geographical spread of such land. [67764]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: As at 31 December 1998, there were 3,182 h.a. of converted organic land and 2,149 h.a. of land in conversion in Wales. It is not possible to estimate reliably the amount of farmland being considered for conversion. However, there has been a substantial increase in the number of inquiries received from prospective organic farmers. The majority of organic producers are in West Wales.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on his Department's strategy for helping Welsh farmers to become organic; and if he will list his Department's current initiatives in this area. [67762]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Our aim is to encourage an expansion of organic farming. The current initiatives are as follows:

The Organic Aid Scheme which provides direct support for conversion.

The Organic Conversion Information Service which provides free advice to prospective organic farmers.

An industry-led working group has been set up to develop an action plan for the organic sector.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Crickhowell House

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what rent the Welsh Health Common Services Authority is paying for 1998–99 for those parts of Crickhowell House which are currently being refurbished in preparation for the National Assembly; and from what budget those payments are made. [67467]

Mr. Michael: None. The Welsh Office will meet the rental costs of those parts of Crickhowell House which have been made available for Assembly purposes.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Mobility Officers

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list those local authorities in Wales which have a designated mobility officer to assist blind and visually handicapped people. [67447]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The provision of assistance to blind and visually handicapped people is now through Rehabilitation Workers.

I understand that the following local authorities directly employ Rehabilitation Workers:

Blaenau Gwent
Bridgend
Cardiff
Carmarthenshire
Ceredigion
Merthyr Tydfil
Monmouthshire
Pembrokeshire
Powys
Rhondda Cynon Taff
Swansea
Value of Glamorgan.

In addition, some local authorities have contracts with other organisations such as the North Wales Society for the Blind; the Gwent Association for the Blind; the Guide Dogs for the Blind or Vision Enhancement Services, to provide services similar to those of Rehabilitation Workers. These local authorities are:

Anglesey
Caerphilly
Cardiff
Conway
Denbighshire
Flintshire
Gwynedd
Newport
Torfaen
Wrexham.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Hospital Services (Partially Sighted People)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list those district general hospitals in Wales which offer specific services for partially sighted people; and which hospitals outside Wales provide such services for people resident in Wales. [67449]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Information relating to specific services for partially sighted people is not held centrally. Ophthalmology services are provided in the following district general hospitals in Wales:

Inpatient, day case and outpatient services

Bronglais General
East Glamorgan General
Prince Charles

Princess of Wales

Singleton

University Hospital of Wales

West Wales General

Ysbyty Gwynedd

Ysbyty Wrexham Maelor

Day Case and Outpatient Services

Neath General

Nevill Hall

Prince Philip

Withybush

Outpatient Services

Ysbyty Glan Clwyd.

Details for hospitals outside Wales are not held by the Department.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Visual Impairment (Children)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what initiatives have been taken by him and his Department to help identify young children who may suffer from visual impairment or potential visual impairment; and what guidelines he has issued to education, health and social services departments in Wales to ensure proper co-ordination of assistance for such children. [67450]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: All babies are offered routine physical examinations at birth, 6 to 8 weeks, and at about 18 months, which will include vision screening. Mothers are encouraged to ask for advice if they have concerns at any time. Vision is also screened at school entry.

Local authorities and schools are responsible for identifying a child's special educational needs (SEN) and for ensuring that appropriate provision is made to meet those needs. The Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of SEN [ISBN 0 85522 444 4] includes guidance on the assessment of children with sensory impairment and on the duties of local authorities and health authorities to co-operate on service provision.

In 'Shaping the Future for Special Education—An Action Programme for Wales', published on 26 January we recognise the need for strong regional collaboration between statutory agencies in planning SEN provision, particularly in relation to low-incidence disabilities including visual impairment. We will be making additional resources available under the Grants for Education Support and Training (GEST) Programme from 1999–2000 to fund regional SEN planning pilot projects in Wales aimed at establishing best practice in this particular field.

The 1997 'Health of Children in Wales' report also provides guidance on child health including visual impairment and the importance of effective multi-agency co-operation.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Public Bodies

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what steps he is taking to promote the principles of the Compact between the Government and the Voluntary Sector in Wales to other public bodies. [68692]

Mr. Michael: I have today written to the Leaders of local authorities, to the Chairs of Health Authorities and Trusts and to the Chairs of NDPBs in Wales drawing their attention to the Compact between Government and the Voluntary Sector in Wales which I launched in November at the annual conference of the Wales Council for Voluntary Action.

The Compact is an agreement about the ways in which Government and the voluntary sector will work together for mutual benefit. It paves the way for the future and is intended to form the basis for the National Assembly's Voluntary Sector Scheme. The Compact is based on the principles of integrity, trust and mutual respect. While the agreement is between Central Government and the voluntary sector, I believe that these principles are equally applicable to relationships between other public bodies and the voluntary sector. I am very pleased that the Welsh Local Government Association has responded very positively indeed. I have agreed with the Association and the Wales Council for Voluntary action on a target of having a local compact in place for every part of Wales by September.

I believe that similar compacts, agreed between each public body in Wales and the voluntary organisations in its field of activity or geographical area will be a powerful way to recognise and improve their relationships.

I will therefore wish to see all other public bodies in Wales meeting the same target as that agreed with the Welsh Local Government Association.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

GPs and Dentists

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many *(a)* general practitioners and *(b)* dentists there are in the NHS in North Wales. [68363]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The latest available data show that there were 435 general medical practitioners in the North Wales health authority area at 1 October 1997, of which 409 were unrestricted principals. There were 209 general dental practitioners at 30 September 1998, of which 198 were principals.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Housing

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to reform the operation of housing regeneration and improvement schemes; and if he will make a statement. [68353]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: There are currently no plans to change the arrangements for housing regeneration and

improvement. It is for local authorities to consider their local priorities in developing regeneration strategies as part of their Housing Strategies and Operational Plans.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Grammar Schools

Mr. Syms: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the state-maintained grammar schools, grouping them by constituency. [67098]

Ms Estelle Morris: A table containing the relevant information has been placed in the Library.

Education Action Zones

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) if he will list the total amount of the private sector financial contribution for each Education Action Zone and show this as a proportion of the total available budget; [67295]

(2) if he will list those instances where a contribution from a TEC to an Education Action Zone has been included as a private sector contribution. [67289]

Ms Estelle Morris: The 25 Education Action Zones have so far raised some £5 million towards the £6 million target for business contributions in their first year of operation. We will be in a position to provide a more detailed statement of the private sector contributions to each zone when they submit their audited financial statements for the financial year 1998–99.

A contribution from a TEC to an EAZ does not count as a business contribution unless it is being sourced from the private sector.

New Deal Entrants

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the number of 18 to 24-year-olds who will enter the New Deal in *(a)* 1999–2000, *(b)* 2000–01 and (3) 2001–02. [67410]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* By convention, the Government do not publish forecasts of unemployment. The New Deal for young people is being delivered through local partnerships. For planning purposes, the Employment Service needs to provide its managers and partners in each local unit of delivery with indicative assumptions for the numbers of young people who might join the New Deal in the year ahead. Such planning assumptions are based on current unemployment levels. They are not forecasts of the actual numbers who will participate in the programme.

We expect the indicative planning assumptions for local units of delivery for 1999–2000 to sum to a figure in the range 200,000 to 250,000 for Britain as a whole. At this stage, we would expect the figures for subsequent years to fall within a similar range.

I placed the planning assumption figures for 1998–99 in the Library in March 1998, and I will put the planning assumption figures for 1999–2000 in the Library as soon as they are ready.

Physical Education

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has for future assessment of schools' performance in respect of physical education. [67743]

Ms Estelle Morris: Ofsted inspections report annually on individual schools' performance and standards in all National Curriculum subjects including physical education. At a national level, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools reports annually to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment on schools' compliance with the National Curriculum requirements, including physical education. The Department also publishes annually end of Key Stage 3 National Teacher Assessment results in physical education. There are no plans to change the current arrangements.

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will *(a)* include in the review of the National Curriculum the area of physical education and *(b)* require it to take evidence from sports, health and public order agencies. [67738]

Ms Estelle Morris: The review of the National Curriculum for the year 2000 is looking at all areas of the school curriculum, including physical education. There will be a wide consultation on the revised National Curriculum in the summer. Sports, health and public order agencies—and other individuals including teachers, pupils and parents—will have opportunities then to make any representations on physical education within the school curriculum.

Maintained Schools

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate, for each local authority, the total number of pupils attending maintained schools. [67654]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* The information requested is shown in the table.

Number (headcount) of pupils in maintained nursery, primary, secondary and special schools [1]—January 1998. By local education authority area, by government office region in England

	Headcount
England	7,680,691
North East	435,289
Hartlepool	17,125
Middlesbrough	26,042
Redcar and Cleveland	26,767
Stockton-on-Tees	33,556
Darlington	16,468
Durham	82,028
Northumberland	52,493
Gateshead	30,709
Newcastle-upon-Tyne	40,731
North Tyneside	32,177
South Tyneside	26,625
Sunderland	50,568

Number (headcount) of pupils in maintained nursery, primary, secondary and special schools [1]—January 1998. By local education authority area, by government office region in England

	Headcount
North West and Merseyside	1,153,328
North West	905,154
Cheshire	161,746
Cumbria	78,514
Bolton	47,329
Bury	29,621
Manchester	70,669
Oldham	42,135
Rochdale	37,144
Salford	37,030
Stockport	44,360
Tameside	38,775
Trafford	36,505
Wigan	51,417
Lancashire	229,909
Merseyside	248,174
Knowsley	30,125
Liverpool	82,831
St. Helens	30,509
Sefton	48,461
Wirral	56,248
Yorkshire and Humber	831,840
East Riding of Yorkshire	49,248
City of Kingston-Upon-Hull	44,214
North East Lincolnshire	28,832
North Lincolnshire	25,607
York	24,723
North Yorkshire	87,100
Barnsley	35,512
Doncaster	52,799
Rotherham	46,229
Sheffield	75,857
Bradford	90,025
Calderdale	35,022
Kirklees	65,287
Leeds	117,242
Wakefield	54,143
East Midlands	663,962
Derby	38,180
Derbyshire	114,043
Leicester City	49,825
Rutland	4,777
Leicestershire	92,092
Lincolnshire	96,933
Northamptonshire	103,135
Nottinghamshire	165,067
West Midlands	887,535
Hereford and Worcester	104,992
Shropshire	65,679
Stoke	40,181
Staffordshire	134,034
Warwickshire	76,063
Birmingham	180,977
Coventry	51,420
Dudley	51,000
Sandwell	52,843
Solihull	37,063
Walsall	50,182
Wolverhampton	43,101
Eastern	821,450
Luton	31,857
Bedfordshire	63,340
Cambridgeshire	104,928
Essex	240,839
Hertfordshire	170,473
Norfolk	110,840
Suffolk	99,173

Number (headcount) of pupils in maintained nursery, primary, secondary and special schools [1]—January 1998. By local education authority area, by government office region in England

	Headcount
London	1,031,805
Inner London	356,905
City of London	204
Camden	22,638
Hackney	25,901
Hammersmith and Fulham	16,485
Haringey	32,624
Islington	24,331
Kensington and Chelsea	10,403
Lambeth	27,595
Lewisham	34,073
Newham	46,261
Southwark	33,815
Tower Hamlets	36,630
Wandsworth	28,183
Westminster	17,762
Outer London	674,900
Barking and Dagenham	28,534
Barnet	47,250
Bexley	38,714
Brent	36,875
Bromley	44,133
Croydon	47,956
Ealing	42,539
Enfield	46,134
Greenwich	36,618
Harrow	28,587
Havering	36,146
Hillingdon	38,630
Hounslow	35,388
Kingston-upon-Thames	20,133
Merton	24,274
Redbridge	39,652
Richmond-upon-Thames	20,089
Sutton	28,101
Waltham Forest	35,147
South East	1,146,419
Berkshire	120,265
Milton Keynes	34,502
Buckinghamshire	74,460
Brighton and Hove	30,168
East Sussex	64,883
Portsmouth	26,241
Southampton	30,928
Hampshire	174,064
Isle of Wight	19,064
Kent	248,843
Oxfordshire	84,101
Surrey	135,322
West Sussex	103,578
South West	709,063
Bath and NE Somerset	25,137
City of Bristol	52,586
North Somerset	27,057
South Gloucestershire	38,834
Cornwall	72,948
Isles of Scilly	261
Devon	154,172
Bournemouth	21,201
Poole	19,901
Dorset	53,039
Gloucestershire	83,496
Somerset	68,671
Swindon	29,190
Wiltshire	62,570

[1] Figures include Primary, Secondary and Special GM Schools

Chess

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps his Department takes to promote chess among children of school age. [67057]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* The Department recognises the educational value of chess and other non-physical games both for their ability to help the acquisition of cognitive thinking skills, and of course, for the enjoyment they provide. We very much welcome the opportunities which many schools provide for their pupils to take part in such activities. It is open to schools to offer such activities as extra-curricular options, which we see as an important part of a broad and balanced education.

A-level Results

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many appeals were made by *(a)* students and *(b)* schools to examination boards following the publication of A level examination results in August 1998. [67962]

Mr. Mudie: Information on the number of A level appeals submitted in respect of the 1998 examination results is not available centrally. Except in the case of privately entered candidates, appeals may be submitted only by the school or college concerned, and not by individual candidates.

New arrangements to be introduced from summer 1999, following a review of the qualifications appeals system, will mean that statistics on appeals will be collected and published by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in future years.

Primary Reception Classes

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate the proportion of teachers currently working with children aged under five years in reception classes who have been trained to teach children under five. [67994]

Ms Estelle Morris: This information is not available centrally.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance his Department has issued to local education authorities on provision for four year olds in primary schools; and if he will make a statement. [67996]

Ms Hodge: All providers of state-funded early education for four year olds must work towards the desirable outcomes drawn up by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and currently under review. The Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership Planning Guidance for 1999–2000 requires Early Years Development and Childcare Plans to set out how reception classes will be structured to cater for the needs of younger four year olds. The draft Code of Practice on School Admissions encourages school admissions authorities to consider adopting a policy of deferred entry for young four year olds at the parent's request.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of four year olds in England are currently in primary reception classes. [67995]

Ms Hodge: The information is not available in the form requested. Fifty-six per cent. of four year olds in England were in infant classes in maintained primary schools in January 1998; infant classes include reception and other classes and exclude nursery classes. Early Years Development and Childcare Plans demonstrate how, in every Local Education Authority area, there is an early education place for every four-year-old whose parents want one in either the maintained, private or voluntary sector.

School Bonus Payments

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what criteria he will use to assess the levels of sustained improvement to be achieved in order to trigger payments under his new proposals for school bonus payments. [67675]

Ms Estelle Morris: The School Performance Award Scheme will reward annually the top proportion of schools which demonstrate excellent performance or significantly improve. We propose to base decisions on which schools to reward under the excellence strand on the outcomes of academic assessments in the previous academic year. Under the improvement, strand awards would be based on sustained improvement against the same indicators. We intend to make different arrangements for schools such as special schools, focusing on achievements against individualised targets, and for schools coming out of special measures more quickly than predicted.

Our detailed proposals for the School Performance Award Scheme will be set out in the Technical Consultation Document on Pay and Performance Management, to be published very shortly. We will take final decisions on the criteria to be employed for awards under the scheme in the light of responses to this consultation.

Teenage Pregnancies

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to support the work of general practitioners and health centres in reducing the levels of teenage pregnancy by providing contraception and advice for pupils via schools. [67942]

Mr. Charles Clarke: In July 1998 the Prime Minister asked the Social Exclusion Unit to work with other government departments building on work already undertaken by the Department of Health to develop an integrated strategy to cut the rates of teenage parenthood, particularly under-age parenthood, and propose better solutions to combat the risk of social exclusion for vulnerable teenage parents and their children. The Department for Education and Employment has been fully involved with this work. The Unit expects to report to Ministers shortly.

Press Releases

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what has been the total cost of the press releases issued by his Department since May 1997. [67924]

Mr. Mudie: The cost of printing and distributing press releases since May 1997 is estimated to be £63,460. This allows us at a cost of £70 per press release to get information to over 1,000 national, local and specialist media as well as local education authorities and other educational bodies. Increasing use is being made of electronic communication to reduce costs.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list for each of the years 1990 to 1998 the number of press releases issued by his Department. [67925]

Mr. Mudie: The number of press releases issued for each year from 1990 to 1998 by this department are as follows:

Year	*Number*
1990	833
1991	852
1992	725
1993	700
1994	564
1995	472
1996	443
1997	447
1998	598

The figures from 1990 to 1995 are for press notices released by Department of Education and the Department of Employment, prior to their merger in July 1995.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what conventions relating to the propriety of Government publicity affect press releases issued by his Department; and if he will set out the conventions relevant to *(a)* content and *(b)* cost. [67926]

Mr. Mudie: The conventions relating to the propriety of Government publicity, including press releases, are contained in the report of the Working Group on the Government Information (the "Mountfield Report"). In particular page 25 of Annexe C states:

> "The four basic conventions, which successive Governments have applied, are that Government information services:
>
> should be relevant to Government responsibilities;
>
> should be objective and explanatory, not tendentious or polemical;
>
> should not be, or be liable to misrepresentation as being partly political; and
>
> should be conducted in an economic and appropriate way, having regard to the need to be able to justify the costs as expenditure of public funds."

Copies of the Working Group report are available from the Library.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list *(a)* those units in his Department and *(b)* the number of departmental staff which are concerned with preparing rebuttals of allegations in the media; and what is (i) the total cost of their work, including salaries and (ii) the number of rebuttals issued since May 1997. [67943]

Mr. Mudie: The Department for Education and Employment has 28 press officers. It is their job to present and explain Departmental policy. No staff are specifically employed to prepare rebuttals of allegations in the media.

The annual staff costs are £739,415.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 12 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *145*, if he will list expenditure not included in his answer incurred *(a)* by task forces and review bodies, *(b)* by focus groups, *(c)* by market research and *(d)* for publications and publicity; and if he will list the bodies which incurred the expenditure. [67945]

Mr. Mudie: There were no additional research, advertising or direct mail costs incurred by task forces and review bodies. Costs for focus group research and market research were included in my previous Answer under public opinion research, 12 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *145*.

Within the Department's Advertising and Publicity budget the total spend on publications from May 1997 to December 1998 was £2,940,000, an average of £147,000 per month. This compares with a total spend for the previous financial year, 1996–97, of £2,500,000, or an average of £208,333 per month.

Schools Adjudicator

Jacqui Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will announce the appointment of the lead adjudicator for school organisation and admissions issues. [68602]

Mr. Blunkett: I have appointed Sir Peter Newsam as the lead adjudicator. He has wide-ranging experience for this post, gained from his time as Education Officer to the Inner London Education Authority, Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, and the Director of the Institute of Education. Further appointments of adjudicators will be made in February.

Statutory Notices

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the outcome of statutory notices that have been waiting for more than five months from the date of each statutory notice for determination by him; and if he will *(a)* list the reasons for the delay in each case and *(b)* estimate when each determination will be made. [67927]

Ms Estelle Morris: The following list shows proposals published over five months ago and still under consideration. Reasons for delay are also shown. Since all aspects of proposals need to be carefully considered it is not possible to give a precise date for when individual decisions will be made, but most of the proposals on the list below are likely to be decided in February or early March.

Date of publication	LEA	Proposal	Reason for delay
19 August 1998	Gloucestershire	Blue Coat CE GM Primary—transfer to new site	Planning permission only recently given
16 August 1998	Bromley	Significant enlargement of Hayes Primary School	School seeking modifications to original proposals
14 August 1998	Brighton and Hove	Reorganisation of a number of schools	Additional information sought from LEA. Decision deferred to allow objectors to put their concerns direct to Ministers.
30 July 1998	Newbury	Turnpike GM School and Shaw House School amalgamation into new county secondary school	Late statement of case—received 20 October
30 July 1998	Brent	Establish new Jewish Primary School	Considering Ofsted advice
20 July 1998	Staffordshire	The Faber Primary Change of status from VC to VA	Delayed submission to Department
17 July 1998	Solihull	Significant enlargement of St. George and St. Theresa RC School	Awaiting HMI comments
16 July 1998	Derby City	Boulton Junior School and Boulton Infant School—amalgamation into new county primary school	Exploration of points of uncertainty with LEA
16 July 1998	Luton	Chantry Infant and Junior Schools amalgamation	DfEE not notified of proposals until 21 October
16 July 1998	Brent	Remove SEN Unit from Mitchell Brooke Primary School and add SEN Unit Oakington Manor School	Advice from Ofsted and A&B need to be discussed with LEA
8 July 1998	Croydon	Castle Hill Primary School addition of SEN unit	Late supply of information by LEA
3 July 1998	East Sussex	Claverham Community College addition of sixth form	Decision deferred pending outcome of ACG round and further consideration of funding issues
18 June 1998	Westminster	Addition of nursery Hampden Gurney CE Primary School	Late statement of Case received January 1999
15 June 1998	Portsmouth	Establish new school	Ministers favourably disposed but awaiting confirmation that proposal can be funded through a cost effective PFI scheme
12 June 1998	Leeds	New Jewish Secondary School	Site problems
10 June 1998	Buckinghamshire	Change of age range from 5–8 to 5–12 and site transfer of St. Mary's CE (VC) First School	LEA consultation process being investigated
10 June 1998	Derbyshire	Addition of sixth form to St. John Houghton RC GM school	A late meeting (early November) with the head of the school to discuss FAS view of the proposals
4 June 1998	Manchester	Closure of Woodhouse Park School, Oldwood School and Poundswick School and establishment of a new school	Late submission of statements of case. Last required submitted on 16 December.
20 May 1998	Barking and Dagenham	Addition of nursery at St. Vincent's RC Primary School	Late statement of Case received December. Ofsted comments awaited.
24 April 1998	Warwickshire	St. Thomas More RC High School addition of sixth form	Timescale of related PFI project
7 April 1998	North Somerset	Broadoak School—removal of sixth form	Technical and Legal issues on transfer of resources from local authority finance
1 April 1998	Hillingdon	Establish VA Sikh primary school—Guru Nanak Sikh	Minded to approve decision 22 December

Date of publication	LEA	Proposal	Reason for delay
31 March 1998	Swindon	Linden Infant and Junior Schools. Proposed amalgamation to form new school	Delays to related special school proposals
12 March 1998	Hackney	Establish a new Jewish Secondary School	Late statement of case not received until 7 July. Ofsted advice required.
4 March 1998	Haringey	Bound's Green Infant's School—significant enlargement	Awaiting LEA confirmation of funding arrangements
4 March 1998	Haringey	Bound's Green Junior School—significant enlargement	Awaiting LEA confirmation of funding arrangements
26 February 1998	Hackney	Our Lady's Convent School—significant enlargement	Consideration of need for school enlargement and cash limit for project
5 February 1998	Merton	Addition of SEN unit at Bushey Middle School	Issues concerning appropriate age range for SEN unit and link with possible Borough wide school reorganisation
5 February 1998	Wandsworth	Addition of nursery at All Saints CE School	Late statement of case received December. Ofsted comments awaited.
30 January 1998	Ealing	Addition of sixth form to Walford High School	Final decision will follow upon meeting between Ministers and delegation. Meeting to be arranged.
30 January 1998	East Sussex	Addition of sixth form at Filsham Valley	Decision deferred pending outcome of ACG round and further consideration of funding issues
29 January 1998	Haringey	Establish a new school Alexandra Park School	Lengthy correspondence about PPP issues
12 December 1997	Devon	Axe Valley School and Community College addition of sixth form	Availability of finance
23 October 1997	Lancashire (pre 1 April 1998)	Addition of nursery at St. Stephen's CE Infant School	Awaiting audit of early years provision
16 October 1997	Sunderland	Change of age range to add nursery to Benedict Bishop CE Primary School	The need to resolve capital issues
1 October 1997	Enfield	New secondary school to be established in World's End Lane	Favourably disposed decision given on 15 May 1998. Decision required once PFI contract signed.
10 July 1997	Westminster	Addition of nursery unit at St. Peter's CE VA Primary School	Promoters awaiting planning permission
25 June 1997	Newham	Addition of a nursery at St. Edward's RC Primary School and transfer to a new site	Early Land ownership issues and recent correspondence with LEA about need for expanded school

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 1 February 1999

TREASURY

Employee Transport

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many companies have been assessed by the Inland Revenue as providing a taxable benefit in kind by virtue of the provision to employees of *(a)* free work-to-home or home-to-work transport and *(b)* stage carriage bus services; and what estimate he has made of (i) the total tax receipts and (ii) the total employee mileage in each case for the last five years for which information is available. [67691]

Dawn Primarolo: I regret that the information requested is not collected centrally within Inland Revenue.

Hon. Member for Coventry, North-West

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he took to investigate the business background of the previous Paymaster General, the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson), at the time of his appointment as Paymaster General. [67331]

Mr. Gordon Brown *[holding answer 27 January 1999]:* All Ministers are appointed by the Prime Minister. The previous Paymaster General, like all Ministers of the Crown, was required to act in accordance with the principles set out in the Ministerial Code.

Energy Efficient Products (Price Incentives)

Mr. Gummer: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what price incentives the Government support to encourage consumers to purchase energy efficient products. [67966]

Ms Hewitt: On 1 July 1998 a reduced VAT rate of 5 per cent. was introduced for the installation of certain energy saving materials under Government funded grant schemes. The reduced rate is targeted at the less well-off.

So far, over 135,000 people have benefited from Government-funded incentive schemes run by the Energy Saving Trust to encourage consumers to install energy efficiency measures. Current schemes include incentives to install insulation, efficient heating, efficient lighting and appliances and small scale Combined Heat and Power.

The Government's Home Energy Efficiency Scheme provides grants for energy efficiency measures for householders receiving income related benefits, disability allowance, or who are over sixty years old. HEES has helped over 2.5 million households over the last seven years.

VAT (Sport, Sports Competitions and Physical Education) Order

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will table a replacement VAT (Sport, Sports Competitions and Physical Education) Order. [67954]

Dawn Primarolo: HM Customs and Excise are seeking comments on the draft VAT (Sport, Sports Competitions and Physical Education) Order 1999 with a view to the Order being laid before the House soon.

Corporation Tax (Football Clubs)

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the annual corporation tax revenue received from football clubs. [67947]

Dawn Primarolo: Tax assessments for accounts to 1996 indicate that the total corporation tax liability of football clubs is between £5 million and £10 million.

VAT

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 14 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *286*, relating to VAT receipts, if he will indicate the amount of the £1.1 billion revenue relating to civil engineering projects. [67972]

Dawn Primarolo: It is not possible to distinguish between VAT revenue relating to buildings and that relating to civil engineering works.

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will announce the outcome of HM Customs' review of the VAT exemption for charity welfare to include home help services; and if he will make a statement. [69047]

Dawn Primarolo: I am pleased to be able to announce today the conclusion of the consultation. Routine domestic tasks provided by charities on a not for profit basis are VAT exempt welfare services when an assessment has been carried out which shows that there is a risk to recipients' physical or mental health or welfare because they are unable to carry out the tasks safely or adequately, or without significant pain or discomfort. Customs will be publicising the details.

VAT Refunds

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list latest estimates and forecast expenditure in cash terms for VAT refunded to general Government for each of (i) 1997–98, (ii) 1998–99, (iii) 1999–2000, (iv) 2000–01 and (v) 2001–02. [68387]

Mr. Milburn: Estimates and forecasts for VAT refunds, consistent with the Pre-Budget Report, are given in a table headed "Accounting and other adjustments in table B12 of the Pre-Budget Report" in the answer given by the then Chief Secretary to the Treasury to the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) on 18 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *586–87*.

Government Capital Consumption

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list latest estimates and forecast expenditure for

the value of general Government non-trading capital consumption for each of (i) 1997–98, (ii) 1998–99, (iii) 1999–2000, (iv) 2000–01 and (v) 2001–02. [68386]

Mr. Milburn: Estimates and forecasts of general government non-trading capital consumption, consistent with the Pre-Budget Report, are given in a table headed "Accounting and other adjustments in table B12 of the Pre-Budget Report" in the answer given by the then Chief Secretary to the Treasury to the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) on 18 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *586–87*.

Tax Credits

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will publish the regulations under which working families' tax credit and disabled tax credit will operate. [69048]

Dawn Primarolo: I have today placed in the Libraries of the House drafts of the Tax Credits Schemes (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations and of the Tax Credits (Claims and Payments) (Amendment) Regulations which contain the main provisions for the introduction of these new tax credits.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Severely Disabled Children

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what *(a)* financial and *(b)* other assistance is available to severely disabled under-fives who have difficulties in walking to allow access to the Motability scheme. [68697]

Mr. Bayley: Access to the Motability Scheme is via receipt of the Higher Rate Mobility Component of Disability Living Allowance, or War Pensioners Mobility Supplement. We recognise that Disability Living Allowance does not help with the mobility needs of severely disabled children under five years old, and this is why we have proposed extending the higher rate mobility component (currently worth £35.85 a week) to three and four year olds to help combat the disadvantage which they suffer. The change is intended to take effect from April 2001. This help will be neither means-tested nor subject to a contribution condition, and it will be tax-free. It will also allow access to the Motability Scheme under the normal rules.

Overseas Pensioners

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will introduce annual adjustments to pensions for pensioners who now reside overseas; and if he will make a statement. [68520]

Mr. Timms: Of the 840,000 UK State pensions paid to people living abroad, about 380,000 already receive annual upratings. The total annual cost of unfreezing the remaining pensions paid abroad is £275 million. Due to competing demands and constraints on Social Security spending, in the UK there are no plans to do so.

Tribunal Hearings (Travel)

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if he will list the changes made to the mileage rate payable to *(a)* appellants, *(b)* companions, *(c)* witnesses and *(d)* unpaid representatives in tribunal hearings since 1 January 1979, indicating the date and amount of change in each case; [66482]

(2) if he will list the changes made to the mileage rate payable to *(a)* tribunal members and *(b)* tribunal staff since 1 January 1979, indicating the date and amount of change in each case. [66483]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available has been placed in the Library.

Capital Limits

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what would be the current value of capital limits if restored to their value at *(a)* 1988 prices and *(b)* 1990 prices. [67560]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Benefit/Capital limit	*Capital limits* *As at April 1988*	*At April 1998 prices*[1]	*As at April 1990*	*At April 1998 prices*	*As at April 1998*
Income Support					
Lower Limit	3,000	4,611	3,000	3,899	3,000
Upper Limit	6,000	9,221	8,000	10,398	8,000
Child's Capital	3,000	4,611	3,000	3,899	3,000
Housing Benefit					
Lower Limit	3,000	4,611	3,000	3,899	3,000
Upper Limit[2]	6,000	9,221	16,000	20,796	16,000
Upper Limit[3]	8,000	12,249	—	—	—
Child's Capital	3,000	4,611	3,000	3,899	3,000
Family Credit					
Lower Limit	3,000	4,611	3,000	3,899	3,000
Upper Limit	6,000	9,221	8,000	10,398	8,000
Child's Capital	3,000	4,611	3,000	3,899	3,000
Social Fund Regulated					
Under 60	500	768	500	650	500
Over 60	1,000	1,537	1,000	1,300	1,000

Benefit/Capital limit	As at April 1988	At April 1998 prices[1]	Capital limits As at April 1990	At April 1998 prices	As at April 1998
Social Fund Discretionary					
Under 60	500	768	500	650	500
Over 60	1,000	1,537	1,000	1,300	1,000

[1] At May 1988 prices for the Housing Benefit Upper Limit of £8,000
[2] Upper Limit at April 1988
[3] Upper Limit at May 1988

Notes:
1. The capital limits have been placed into real terms using the RPI (all items) index, not ROSSI
2. As the question does not relate to uprating, real values have not been rounded

London Organised Fraud Investigation Team

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) for what reason the offices of the London Organised Fraud Investigation Team were re-opened on the 9 November, and who had responsibility for this decision; [67718]

(2) for what reason the London Organised Fraud Investigation Team's offices were shut down and sealed between 12 October and 9 November 1998; and what was the purpose of the closure; [67755]

(3) what proportion of the London Organised Fraud Investigation Team was kept on full pay during the closure of their offices between 12 October and 9 November 1998; and what was the total cost of employing the unit staff during this period; [67720]

(4) what action was taken during the closure of the London Organised Fraud Investigation Team's offices to protect the evidence held there from being tampered with by those who had access to the premises during the period of closure; [67757]

(5) how many of the London Organised Fraud Investigation Team's cases which were pending on 12 October have been dropped since the offices re-opened on 9 November; and what are the reasons for these cases having been dropped; [67719]

(6) who had access to the offices of the London Organised Fraud Investigation Team during its closure between 12 October and 9 November 1998; what visits were carried out during the closure; and what was the purpose of each such visit; [67756]

(7) whether any action was taken following the closure of the London Organised Fraud Investigation Team offices against any employees of the unit; [67717]

(8) what was the total cost of the closure of the London Organised Fraud Investigation Team's offices between 12 October and 9 November 1998; [67721]

(9) which ministers in his Department were aware of the decision to shut down and seal the offices of the London Organised Fraud Investigation Team between 12 October and 9 November 1998; and who was responsible for this decision; [67754]

Mr. Timms: While this Department provides support, including funding, the Association of London Government (ALG) is responsible for the management of the London Organised Fraud Investigation Team (LOFIT). The ALG established a management committee to carry out this function on which this Department had observer status.

Decisions on all aspects of the management of LOFIT, including access to the premises, finance and personnel matters and handling of outstanding cases, were for the ALG to make as the managing body. The decision to close LOFIT down was taken by the ALG. The Secretary of State and the then Minister of State were made aware of the ALG's decision.

Income-related Benefits

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will calculate the current proportion of the total population in receipt of one or more of the main income-related benefits. [68091]

Angela Eagle: As at May 1997, there were 7,990,000 recipients of one or more of the main income-related benefits in Great Britain. This represents 13.9 per cent. of the total population.

Notes:

1. Income-related benefits are Income Support, Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, Family Credit, Disability Working Allowance, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit.
2. Overlaps between benefits have been taken out.
3. Caseload figure has been rounded to the nearest ten thousand.
4. Numbers are based on benefit units, which may be a single person or a couple.
5. Housing Benefit/Council Tax Benefit figures include estimates due to the data collection procedure in Scotland.
6. Population is based on all residents in Great Britain at Mid-1997.

Source:

1. Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, May 1997—5 per cent. sample.
2. Jobseeker's Allowance Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, May 1997—5 per cent. sample.
3. Family Credit Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, May 1997—5 per cent sample.
4. Disability Working Allowance 100 per cent. scan of awards.
5. Housing Benefit Management Information System, annual 1 per cent. sample of claimants without Income Support/JSA (IB), May 1997.
6. Population Estimates unit, ONS.

Income Support and Supplementary Benefits

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list for each year since 1979 the proportion of *(a)* the total population and *(b)* lone parent families in receipt of (i) income support and (ii) supplementary benefits. [68108]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Percentage population who claimed income support or supplementary benefit and the number of these claims which were made by lone parents, for each year since 1979

Year	IS and supplementary benefit (prior to 1998) claimants (Thousand)	Percentage of total population claiming IS or supplementary benefit (prior to 1988)	Lone parents claiming IS or supplementary benefit (prior to1988) (Thousand)	Percentage of population who are lone parents claiming IS or supplementary benefit	Percentage of lone parent population claiming IS or supplementary benefit
1979	2,855	5.2	306	0.6	36.5
1980	3,118	5.7	316	0.6	36.4
1981	3,723	6.8	369	0.7	41.0
1982	4,267	7.8	415	0.8	44.6
1983	4,349	7.9	449	0.8	n/a
1984	4,609	8.4	492	0.9	52.4
1985	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
1986	4,938	8.9	575	1.0	57.0
1987	4,896	8.8	629	1.1	59.9
1988	4,352	7.8	694	1.3	63.7
1989	4,161	7.5	756	1.4	65.2
1990	4,180	7.5	793	1.4	64.5
1991	4,487	8.0	871	1.5	67.0
1992	5,088	9.0	957	1.7	69.8
1993	5,643	10.0	1,013	1.8	70.3
1994	5,675	10.0	1,039	1.8	68.8
1995	5,670	10.0	1,056	1.9	67.7
1996	5,549	9.7	1,059	1.9	66.2
1997	3,958	6.9	1,014	1.8	n/a
1998	3,853	6.7	961	1.7	n/a

Notes:

1. Numbers are rounded to the nearest thousand.
2. Income support replaced supplementary benefit in April 1998.
3. Data are not available for 1995.
4. Numbers are given at a point in time. For 1979, the month was November. For 1980, to 1984 the month was December. In 1986 and 1996, the month was February and from 1987 to 1998, the month was May.
5. Sample sizes: 1977–82 supplementary pension cases 1 in 200; supplementary allowance cases 1 in 50. 1983–87 supplementary pension cases 1 in 200, supplementary allowance cases 1 in 50. 1988–1993 1 in 100. 1994 to date 1 in 20.
6. The numbers of income support and supplementary benefit claimants for the period prior to 1996 include claims for income support for the unemployed. In October 1996, jobseeker's allowance replaced income support as the benefit claimed by the unemployed. The figures from 1996 onwards therefore do not include any claims by the unemployed.
7. The numbers of lone parents claiming income support for the period prior to 1996 may include claims by unemployed lone parents. The figures provided for 1996 onwards will not include unemployed lone parents.
8. An estimate of the 1998 population of Great Britain has not published by the Office for National Statistics. We have therefore used the population estimate for 1997 when completing our calculation for 1998.
9. LFS estimates subject to revision following released of Adjusted Household Database.

Source:

1. Supplementary Benefit Statistics Annual Enquiries, 1979 to 1987.
2. Income Support Statistics Annual Enquiries, 1988 to 1993.
3. Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiries from May 1994 to May 1998.
4. Population figures are taken from the Office for National Statistics, Estimated Resident.
5. Population figures for 1979 to 1997.
6. Population Trends.

Pensioners

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to ensure that those pensioners who will be affected by the changes in SERPS inheritance will not be affected further; and what plans he has to amend these changes. [67915]

Mr. Timms: We have no plans to alter those provisions of the Social Security Act 1986 which, from 6 April 2000, reduce inherited SERPS from 100 per cent. to 50 per cent.

Notes:

1. The previous Conservative Government introduced a number of changes to SERPS in the Social Security Act 1986 to reduce expenditure.

2. The rationale behind this particular change was to bring SERPS in line with occupational schemes where inheritance of half occupational pension rights is the norm.

3. The change does not take effect until 6 April 2000.

4. The halving of inherited SERPS was not widely publicised at the time. It was included in publicity about the Pensions Act 1995. From Spring 1996, information has been included in Leaflets NP46 (A Guide to Retirement) and NP45 (A Guide to Widows' Benefit). A bulletin has recently been issued to staff in the Benefits Agency to ensure that they are fully aware of the change and can advise claimants accordingly.

Bereavement Benefits

Mr. Ivan Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the responses to the consultation exercise on the reform of bereavement benefits; and if he will make a statement. [68915]

Angela Eagle: The consultation period ended on 13 January 1999 and 76 responses have been received. Thirty one were from organisations at national and local level, and local authorities. The rest were from individuals

including 3 from hon. Members. We thank all those who responded to the consultation document and can assure them that we are carefully considering the responses.

A list of those who responded has been placed in the Library. Copies of this list and specific responses are available on request from The Widows' Benefit Consultation Team, 3rd Floor, The Adelphi, 1–11 John Adam Street, London WC2N 6HT.

PRIME MINISTER

Senior Salaries Review Body

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the report and recommendations of the Review Body on Senior Salaries. [68817]

The Prime Minister: The 1999 report of the Review Body on Senior Salaries, covering pay arrangements for the senior civil service, senior military officers and the judiciary, together with the annual uprating of Parliamentary salaries, has been published today. Copies are available in the Vote Office and the Library of the House. I am grateful to the Chairman and Members of the Pay Review Body for the work they have put into their report.

In the Comprehensive Spending Review, the Government made it clear that public sector pay settlements would need to be fair, affordable and consistent with the targets for public service improvements which we have set. The terms of reference of the Review Body on Senior Salaries were revised to ensure that, in making its recommendations, four key considerations set out in the Comprehensive Spending Review were taken into account:

recruitment, retention and motivation of the groups concerned;

the requirements on departments to meet their output targets for the delivery of services;

the requirements on departments to stay within their three year expenditure limits; and

the Government's inflation target, requiring responsibility in pay settlements across the public and private sectors.

The main recommendations of the Review Body on Senior Salaries are:

an increase of 2.8 per cent. in the minimum and maximum values of each of the pay bands for the senior civil service. Within the bands, Departments will determine individual awards on the basis of performance.

an increase of 3.3 per cent. in the maxima of the pay ranges within which individual salaries are set for senior military personnel.

an increase of 3.5 per cent. in judicial salaries.

The Review Body recommended that these increases should take effect from 1 April 1999.

The Government are satisfied that these recommendations reflect the key considerations set out in the Comprehensive Spending Review and we have therefore decided to accept them. The additional cost of the recommendations will be contained within the Departmental expenditure limits announced in July and it remains the Government's intention to meet the objectives and targets set out in the Public Service Agreements. This is in line with the Government's prudent and disciplined approach to public spending and their commitment to delivering high quality public services and low inflation.

The Lord Chancellor will respond in the next few weeks to the Review Body's recommendations on the fee structure for part-time judiciary which, although included in this report, was an exercise separate from the Review Body's consideration of senior salaries.

Pay increases for Members of Parliament and Ministers are linked automatically to the increase in pay bands for the senior civil service. Their pay entitlement from 1 April 1999 will therefore increase by 2.8 per cent. in addition to the 1.5 per cent. increase due as the deferred second stage of the 1998 pay award.

The Review Body on Senior Salaries will produce shortly a further report on the pay of junior Ministers in the House of Lords, office holders in the devolved administrations and on certain aspects of Parliamentary allowances.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what opportunity will be afforded to asylum seekers who have been able to demonstrate that they have been the victims of unscrupulous advisers to establish their claims without their case being prejudiced by the actions of those advisers. [67115]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Any representations made in support of asylum claims are considered, even if they are received after an initial decision has been taken. Consequently, it would be open to any asylum seeker who considered that they had been poorly advised to inform the Immigration and Nationality Directorate at any time. This information would be treated on its merits.

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many cases of asylum application made between January 1985 and 1 July 1993 have been disposed of to date; and with what result. [67733]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information is given in the table.

Asylum applications made between 1 January 1985 and 1 July 1993 by status as at the end of 1998[1]

Case status as at 31 December 1998	
Granted asylum	11%
Granted exceptional leave	43%
Refused after full consideration	28%
Refused on 3rd country grounds	1%
Paragraph 340 refusal[2]	17%
Total decisions[3]	125,800
Undecided[3,4]	6,600
Total applications[3]	132,400

[1] Percentages are estimates, rounded to the nearest whole number, based on cases for which information is recorded.
[2] Paragraph 340 of Immigration Rules. For failure to provide evidence to support the asylum claim within a reasonable period.
[3] Rounded to the nearest 100, excluding dependants.
[4] New estimate of the number of pre-July 1993 asylum applications that remain outstanding.

Departmental Papers (Access for Visually Impaired)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has for departmental *(a)* White and *(b)* Green Papers to be made available on floppy disk format in a form which facilitates access for the visually impaired. [67841]

Mr. Straw: The manner in which documents are produced and disseminated is decided upon by careful consideration of the individual merits and requirements of each publication.

The Home Office has employed a number of alternative publication formats in recent years and it is now common practice to make White and Green Papers available via the Internet in a format that is accessible to the widest range of users.

The Cabinet Office is currently producing guidance to Departments on the arrangements for production of White and Green Papers, as announced by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, on 27 January 1999, *Official Report*, column 296.

Court Visits

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* Crown courts, *(b)* magistrates courts and *(c)* youth courts he has visited in the last year. [67581]

Mr. Straw: In the last year I have visited one Magistrates' Court and two Youth Courts as follows:

1 May 1998: Oxford Magistrates Court

8 September 1998: Youth Court Sitting at Uxbridge Magistrates Court

16 September 1998: Youth Court Sitting at Bristol Magistrates Court

20 November 1998: Blackburn Magistrates Court

In addition, I attended and addressed five regional magistrates' meetings as follows:

23 June 1998: North West in Blackburn

23 July 1998: London and South East in London

1 September 1998: Wales in Cardiff

16 September 1998: South West in Bristol

22 September 1998: North East in Newcastle.

Offenders (Deaths)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many deaths of ex-offenders occurred within *(a)* one month and *(b)* six months of release from custody in each of the last three years; and if he will make a statement; [67920]

(2) what research his Department is undertaking into the number of deaths of former prison inmates which occur shortly after release from custody; and if he will make a statement; [67921]

(3) what estimate he has made of the number of deaths, indicating separately self-inflicted deaths, of ex-offenders which occur shortly after release from custody; and if he will make a statement. [67919]

Mr. George Howarth: The available information relates to people who are under probation service supervision following release from prison, which, in the case of those sentenced to less than 12 months, is on a voluntary basis:

Number of deaths of those under supervision by the Probation Service

England and Wales — *Number of persons*

Time between release and death	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
Under one month	26	33	34
One month and under six months	53	47	63
Six months or more	29	21	27

The Department is not currently carrying out research on deaths following release from prison.

Criminal Justice (Terrorism and Conspiracy Act) 1998

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what powers included in the Criminal Justice (Terrorism and Conspiracy) Act 1998 have been used; on how many occasions; and if he will make a statement. [67922]

Mr. Straw: Records indicate that, as of today's date, no cases have come to court in the United Kingdom involving the use of the powers in sections 1–4 of the Criminal Justice (Terrorism and Conspiracy) Act 1998 (concerning proscribed and specified organisations). However, investigations continue and use of the powers is of course, available for the future. As to sections 5–7 of the Act (conspiracy to commit offences outside the United Kingdom), information on their use is not collected centrally, but it is expected that data on convictions will begin to become available in Spring 1999.

European Parliamentary Elections

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made in *(a)* COREPER and *(b)* other working groups of the Council of Ministers concerning the proposals of the European Parliament for changes to arrangements for elections to the European Parliament after 1999. [67931]

Mr. George Howarth: The European Parliament adopted proposals for Common Principles for elections to the European Parliament on 15 July 1998. These were considered by the Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER) on 10 September and 9 December 1998 and referred to the General Affairs Working Group of the Council. Discussion there is continuing and the General Affairs Working Group will report to COREPER in due course.

Metropolitan Police

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the property owned by the Metropolitan Police Force which is currently for sale; what representations he has received on such sales; and if he will make a statement. [68048]

Kate Hoey: The Receiver for the Metropolitan Police District tells me that relevant information is updated monthly. As at 31 December 1998, the property for sale or planned for sale was:

36 Abbotshall Avenue, Enfield
20 and 24 Alverstone Road, Brent
54 Beaconsfield Road, Epson and Ewell
40 Beak Street, Soho
65 Beaminster Gardens, Redbridge
67 Belvedere Road, Bexley
83 Beverley Gardens, Brent
Biggin Hill Police Station
37 Birchwood Grove, Richmond
31 Blandford Road, Teddington
33 Blandford Road, Teddington
7 Boundary Way, Croydon
28 Bow Street, Covent Garden
156 Bridle Road, Croydon
197 and 201 Broadwalk, Greenwich
1–21 Broomfield Road, Poplar
Bryn Conwy and Woodlands, Betws-y-Coed
Bunns Lane (Site), Mill Hill
128 Catford Hill, Catford
22–24 Caxton Road, Wimbledon
58A Cedar Drive, Harrow
154 Central Road, Worcester Park
18 Cheshunt Avenue, Richmond
Chislehurst Police Station
Collier Road Police Station, Havering
1–27 Connaught House, Muswell Hill
19 and 31 Cumberland Avenue, Havering
1–6 Dinsdale Lodge, Wandsworth
4 Downland Way, Sutton
135 Dugdale Hill Lane, Hertsmere
East Ham Police Station and Section House, Newham
107, 113, 115 and 117 East Road, Chadwell Heath
143 Ember Lane, Elmbridge
Erith Police Station, Erith
21 Fayerfield, Hertsmere
8 Forest Edge, Epping Forest
16 and 20 Frogmore Gardens, Hillingdon
16 Glendale Mews, Bromley
107 Goshawk Gardens, Hillingdon
27 Griesdale Gardens, Croydon
23 Grove Road, Harrow
Ham Police Office
4 Helgiford Gardens, Spelthorne
250 High Street, Acton, W3
Highbridge Street, Waltham Abbey
18 Hilton Way, Croydon
61 Horns Road, Redbridge
7 Hycliffe Gardens, Epping Forest
16 Jews Walk, Lewisham
32 Kingsgate Avenue, Barnet
151A Knollys Road, Streatham
39 Lechmere, Epping Forest
100 Linden Way, Enfield
371 Lonsdale Road, Barnes
19–21 Lyon Road, Merton
Manchester Road, Isle of Dogs
182 Manford Way, Redbridge
Maurice Drummond House, Greenwich
St. Johns Hall, Monck Street, Westminster
101, 111 and 135 Morton Way, Enfield
81 and 95 Mount Pleasant, Barnet
MRD Rowdell Road, Northolt
71 Mungo Park Way, Bromley
54 Neasden Lane, Harlesden
14–18 Shepherdess Place, 7 Nile Street, Shoreditch
Northumberland Park Section House, Tottenham
7 Oakways, Greenwich
355 Old Street, Clerkenwell
Olwen House, Loman Street, Southwark
Paul Breen Section House, Sydenham
1–8 Priory Close, Spelthorne
Putney Police Station and Section House
Pen-y-Gwaith, Gwenned
10 Ramilies Place, Soho
55A-H Redcliffe Road, Kensington
Rochester Row Police Station, Westminster
28 and 30 Roke Road, Kenley
1–11 Rosslyn Crescent/24–34 Station Road, Harrow
4 Saxonbury Avenue, Spelthorne
1 Southbourne Close, Harrow
86 Sparrow Drive, Orpington
17 Springfield Gardens, Bickley
St. Ann's Road, Hounslow
361–367A St. Margaret's Road, Isleworth
403 St. Margaret's Road, Richmond
St. Mary's Lane Police Station, Upminster
Staines Police Station
68 Station Approach, Hillingdon
24, 32 and 36 Stratton Avenue, Sutton
2 Stumps Hill Lane, Bromley
175A Swakeleys Road, Uxbridge
21 The Briars, Broxbourne
1–6 The Close, Redbridge
9–10 The Close, Redbridge
3 The Green, Spelthorne
2 and 4 The Oaks, Ruislip
Tottenham Court Road Police Station, Camden
27 Trewenna Drive, Hertsmere
2 Turks Close, Hillingdon
28–30 Wanstead High Street, Wanstead
70 Waterfall Road, Enfield
108 Watling Street, Bexley
Welling Police Station, Welling
West Hendon Police Station and adjacent land, West Hendon
53A Westbury Road, Kingston
58 York Road, Barnet

The Prime Minister has received a Petition signed by many people, calling for Collier Row Police Station to be retained.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has received several letters from Mrs. Burgess, and from an hon. Member on her behalf, about the proposed closure of Chislehurst Police Station.

The Receiver tells me that in addition:

"as to 28–30 High Street, Wanstead, following public objections to the sale of the site for redevelopment, a public inquiry took place in December 1998. The proposed purchaser's planning application has now been rejected; as to Manchester Road, Isle of Dogs, local residents are objecting to the sale of land adjoining a police office, for housing development; and

as to 23–24 Station Road and 1–11 Rosslyn Crescent, Harrow, the members of a mosque adjoining the site have objected to the sale of land to a housing association by open tender as they wish to acquire the site for a mosque."

Child Protection

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he has had with police forces on their responsibility for bringing to the attention of local social services departments their concerns for the welfare and protection of children who might be at risk; and if he will make a statement. [67988]

Mr. Boateng: Home Office officials are involved in continuing dialogue with the Association of Chief Police Officers about issues of child protection.

It has long been recognised that effective child protection work is best achieved through good inter-agency co-operation, a view most recently endorsed in the report of a thematic inspection of police child protection functions by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary.

"Working Together under the Children Act 1989—A Guide to arrangements for inter-agency Co-operation for the Protection of Children from Abuse" provides guidance for inter-professional and inter-agency co-operation, including between the police and social services. That guidance is currently being revised following a consultation exercise last year. Both the police and social services are contributing to that work which is being led by the Department of Health.

I am sure that the police are well aware of the need to bring to the attention of local social services departments any concerns they have about possible child abuse, in the same way that I would hope that social services would notify the police at the earliest opportunity when they come across a case which constitutes, or may constitute, a criminal offence.

CID Officers

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will assess the advantages and disadvantages of putting CID officers into uniform for part of the working week. [68052]

Mr. Boateng: It is an operational matter for chief constables whether they make provision available for transfer of officers between Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and uniform duties, and the rotation of staff within specialisms, to allow for career development leading to a wider experience of policing.

Immigration and Nationality Directorate

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he plans to visit the PEO of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate at Lunar House. [67953]

Mr. Straw: I visited Lunar House on 28 November 1997 and on 14 September 1998, and my visit on 28 November 1997 included a visit to the Public Inquiry Office. I plan to visit Lunar House and other Immigration and Nationality Directorate offices in Croydon, again when my diary permits.

"From Murmur to Murder"

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he had with the Commission for Racial Equality on the drafting of the "From Murmur to Murder" document. [68184]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: None. "From Murmur to Murder" was produced by the Midlands Probation Training Consortium on behalf of chief probation officers in the region.

South Yorkshire Police

Maria Eagle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the costs to the South Yorkshire Police Authority of funding the defence of David Godfrey Duckenfield and Bernard Dean Murray in the cases of Adlington v Murray and Adlington v Duckenfield in the Leeds Magistrates Court. [68223]

Mr. Boateng: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has made no assessment. It is a matter for the South Yorkshire Police Authority to consider how to fund the defence of Mr. Duckenfield and Mr. Dean Murray and for the Chief Constable to allocate resources to the policing of the force area.

I understand from the Clerk to the South Yorkshire Police Authority, that the Authority has set aside £500,000 for legal costs work in connection with Hillsborough. This sum has been taken from the authority's reserves. There has, therefore, been no immediate impact on the resources available for day to day policing.

Maria Eagle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received from *(a)* South Yorkshire Police Authority and *(b)* South Yorkshire Police about the adequacy of their grant settlement for 1999–2000. [68829]

Mr. Boateng: We have received one letter from the Clerk to the South Yorkshire Police Authority raising a number of issues about the proposed funding settlement for the South Yorkshire Police in 1999–2000.

City Status

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when it is next proposed to create city status in England; and if he will make a statement on the criteria for judging successful applicants. [68246]

Mr. Straw: Her Majesty has said that she intends to mark both the Millennium and the 50th Anniversary of Her Accession to the Throne, in 2002, by grants of city status to towns in the United Kingdom. City status is a rare mark of honour granted by Letters Patent; it is not a right which can be claimed by the fulfilment of certain conditions.

Graffiti

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what assessment he has made of changes in the incidence of graffiti over the past five years; [68453]

(2) if he will make a statement on the Government's initiative to prevent graffiti on public property; and what is his estimate of the annual amount of money spent on cleaning up graffiti on public property; [68455]

(3) what plans his Department has to introduce a national or regional graffiti tackling squad. [68457]

Mr. Boateng: Graffiti is a form of criminal damage, which is recorded in the Home Offices Statistical Bulletin "Notifiable Offences". According to the Bulletin covering England and Wales, April 1997 to March 1998, there were 861,800 offences of criminal damage recorded in 1997–98, a fall of 8.2 per cent. on the previous year. The Bulletin does not give a sub-total for graffiti. It is not possible, therefore, to comment on the changes of incidences of graffiti over the past five years. Nor is it possible to estimate with any degree of accuracy the amount of money spent on cleaning up graffiti on public property.

The Government do, however, take this form of offence seriously. Under the Criminal Damage Act 1971, where the value of the damage is more than £2,000, the maximum penalty is ten years' imprisonment for those over 18, and up to two years' detention in a Young Offenders Institution for those aged 15–17.

The Government have no present plans for a national or regional graffiti tackling squad. One of the most effective ways of tackling crimes such as vandalism and graffiti is through co-ordinated preventative action at local level involving all of the relevant agencies such as the police, local authorities, schools and other voluntary bodies leading to a plan of action.

The police and local authorities now have a statutory duty under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 to develop crime reduction partnerships. Where graffiti is identified as a major crime and disorder problem, we would expect the strategy to address it. The Act does not, however, specify what categories of crime and disorder must be included in the audit and strategy. This is a decision to be taken locally.

Insider Dealing

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many successful prosecutions for insider dealing offences have been brought since 1986; [68140]

(2) if he will list the offences for which successful prosecutions for insider dealing have been brought since 1986. [68141]

Mr. Boateng: Available data taken from the Home Office Court Proceedings Database are given in the table.

Number of defendants prosecuted at magistrates' courts and convicted at all courts for insider dealing[1] offences, England and Wales, 1986–1997

Year	Prosecutions	Convictions[2]
1986	—	—
1987	1	1
1988	—	—
1989	11	2
1990	3	2
1991	8	2
1992	—	2
1993	2	2
1994	2	2
1995	2	—
1996	1	—
1997	—	—

[1] The legislation covering offences of 'insider dealing' for the period 1986 to 1997 includes Companies Securities (Insider Dealing) Act 1985 which came into force on 1 July 1985 and was supplemented by provisions of ss173–178 of the Financial Services Act 1986; and Sec 52 of the Criminal Justice Act 1993 which came into force on 1 March 1994.

[2] Includes persons proceeded against in earlier years.

Police Grant

Mr. Olner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has for the allocation of police grant in 1999–2000. [68825]

Mr. Straw: I have today laid before the House the Police Grant Report (England and Wales) 1999–2000 (HC 179). The Report sets out my determination for 1999–2000 of the aggregate amount of grants that I propose to pay under section 46(2) of the Police Act 1996, and the amount to be paid to each police authority including the Receiver for the Metropolitan Police District.

Electoral Registration

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to amend the law on electoral registration. [68796]

Mr. George Howarth: My Working Party on Electoral Procedures has recommended to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary that he should introduce legislation to provide a rolling electoral registration scheme. We are working up detailed proposals and examining other possible changes to the registration system.

Prison Service (Quinquennial Review)

Ms Keeble: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made in the Quinquennial Review of the Prison Service which he announced on 31 July 1998. [69049]

Mr. Straw: The first two stages of the Quinquennial Review of the Prison Service have now been concluded and I am today placing in the Library copies of the Evaluation of Performance and the Prior Options Report. A revised Framework Document is being finalised and will be published shortly.

The Evaluation of Performance concludes that since becoming an agency, and during a period of rising prison population, the Prison Service has achieved a remarkable turnaround in performance to which agency status has contributed for the following reasons:

the delegated freedoms and flexibilities to the Director General;

a focus on agreed outputs and targets for which the Director General is personally responsible to the Home Secretary; and

a more cohesive organisation with a more visible Director General enables him to provide clearer leadership and to communicate with the organisation more effectively and to speak publicly for the Prison Service.

The Prior Options Report reviews agency and other organisational options for the Prison Service and concludes that continued agency status offers the most appropriate and cost effective means of achieving Home Office aims. It notes and endorses the major agenda of work already in progress or planned as a result of the Comprehensive Spending Review and the Prison Probation Review. It notes the need for further work in the next period of agency status on contractorisation issues taking into account experience with tighter "contracts" between Headquarters and individual prisons and the overall contribution of the private sector to prison services.

In the light of these findings, I am accepting the recommendation of the Prior Options Report that agency status should be reconfirmed.

France (British Citizens)

Mr. Collins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations his Department has made in the last 12 months *(a)* through Interpol and *(b)* through other means to the French Ministry of the Interior concerning the handling of deaths of British citizens in France; and if he will make a statement. [68132]

Mr. Fatchett: I have been asked to reply.

My noble Friend the Under-Secretary wrote to Mme Guigou, French Minister of Justice, on 4 August, stressing the importance of bringing to justice murderers of British nationals in France. On 30 November she met senior officials, in Paris, from the Ministry of Interior to discuss the handling of deaths of British nationals and to press for more vigorous investigations by the French authorities.

On 21 and 29 April 1998, the Deputy Head of Mission at our Embassy in Paris, raised specific cases with senior officials from the French Ministry of Interior.

Interpol London becomes involved in various aspects of cases involving death of British nationals abroad, particularly where crime is suspected. This is done on a case-by-case basis.

Our Embassy in Paris continues to remind the French authorities of the importance we attach to investigating the death of British nationals in France.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Area Plans

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what financial and staff resources will be provided to the Planning Agency to undertake work on the area plan for Newry and Mourne; and when work will commence on it. [67752]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Responsibility for these issues has been delegated to the Planning Service under its chief executive, Mr. T. W. Stewart. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from T. W. Stewart to Mr. Eddie McGrady, dated 29 January 1999:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Question about the commencement of work on the Newry and Mourne Area Plan.

There is no individual Newry and Mourne Area Plan proposed rather, a combined plan for the Banbridge and Newry and Mourne District Council areas. The Development Plan Programme is currently under review, and will be approved by the Minister with responsibility for the Department of the Environment.

I will write to the hon. Gentleman when the timing of commencement of the Banbridge/Newry and Mourne Area Plan has been decided.

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when work is planned to commence on the new Down Area Plan; and what consultation will be held in respect of it. [67751]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Responsibility for these issues has been delegated to the Planning Service under its chief executive, Mr. T. W. Stewart. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from T. W. Stewart to Mr. Eddie McGrady, dated 29 January 1999:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Question about the commencement of work on the Down Area Plan.

I can confirm that work on the Ards/Down Area Plan commenced in December 1998. Throughout the Plan preparation process there will be opportunities for regular consultation with both Ards and Down District Councils in accordance with a programme to be agreed with each of them. There will also be ongoing consultation with a range of statutory consultees and, at key stages of the project, community groups, interested parties and members of the general public will also be consulted.

I do hope this clarifies the position.

Seamus Ludlow

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made in the RUC investigation into the murder of Seamus Ludlow in 1976; how many people have been questioned in the past 12 months; how many people have been charged; what representations she has received from the Irish Government; and what assessment the DPP has made of the feasibility of a trial within the Northern Ireland jurisdiction. [66486]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* Four persons were arrested and interviewed in February 1998; they were released without charge. A police investigation file in respect of the murder which was submitted by the

Chief Constable to the Director of Public Prosecutions in October 1998 remains under consideration. The Irish authorities are aware of the position.

Firearms

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans she has to consult outside bodies on regulations which are proposed as a result of the review of the Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 1981. [66815]

Mr. Ingram: The national shooting organisations and governing bodies of the various shooting sports have already made a valuable contribution to the review of the Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 through the normal consultation process. Later this year, the Secretary of State intends to lay before Parliament a draft of a new Firearms Order. In line with the provisions of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the proposed Draft Order in Council will be referred to the Northern Ireland Assembly for their consideration. It will also be published and representations will be invited from all interested bodies.

Organic Farming

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will estimate the amount of farmland *(a)* converted, *(b)* under conversion and *(c)* considering conversion to organic; what assessment she has made of future trends in this area; and if she will make a statement on the geographical spread of such land. [67766]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The information is as follows:

Converted: 176 hectares

Under Conversion: 20 hectares

Considering Conversion: 607 hectares

The indications are that there will be a significant increase in the amount of land in NI under organic production over the next few years.

It is, however, not possible to assess the geographical spread of such land although from the approaches from farmers considering conversion the interest is across a range of commodities and it is well spread across NI.

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on her Department's strategy for helping Northern Ireland's farmers to become organic; and if she will list her Department's current initiatives in this area. [67763]

Mr. Paul Murphy: There has been very little uptake of organic farming in Northern Ireland. In recognition of this situation, and in line with the Government's policy of encouraging more organic production, the Organic Farming Liaison Group (OFLG) was established to co-ordinate and pursue increased uptake of organic farming. The OFLG bring together officials from the Department of Agriculture with representatives of conventional and organic farming.

The existing Organic Aid Scheme has been reviewed and increased rates of payment will be available during the first five years to those who enter conversion after 1 April 1998.

The Department of Agriculture provides advice and guidance to prospective organic farmers. It has developed organic production information packs and has made available a two day course entitled "Introduction to Organic Production" which aims to provide basic information for farmers and growers, who are potentially interested in converting to organic production.

I am pleased to record that, in recent months, there has been a marked increase in interest from conventional farmers and a number have submitted applications for registration of land for organic conversion. This interest has been across a range of commodities and from various parts of NI.

Lone Parents

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assessment she has made of the report issued on 11 January which was commissioned by the Department of Health and Social Security on lone parents and employment in Northern Ireland; and what action she will take in respect of the recommendations made. [67750]

Mr. McFall: The report "others on Benefit" is the most detailed investigation ever undertaken in Northern Ireland into the obstacles that lone parents face when considering taking up work. It will make a very useful contribution to the development of the wide range of services that are needed by lone parents in Northern Ireland.

Many of the recommendations and conclusions reached in the report are being addressed under the New Deal for Lone Parents, the National Childcare strategy, the current review of the child support maintenance system and the proposed introduction of Working Families Tax Credit to replace Family Credit from 5 October 1999. I have arranged for copies of the report to be widely distributed so that its recommendations can be taken into account in the provision of future services for lone parents.

Plastic Bullets

Mr. Sedgemore: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assessment he has made of the recommendations of the UN Committee Against Torture in respect of the use of plastic bullets for riot control. [67999]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 28 January 1999]:* Plastic baton rounds are used by the police and Army in Northern Ireland only where life or property is at risk, and provide a means by which police officers and soldiers can protect themselves when under attack. Ideally, it would not be necessary to use them: if there were no violent disorder then there would be no requirement to deploy plastic baton rounds.

The nature and scale of public order situations which can arise in Northern Ireland and the threat of terrorist attack often prevent the security forces from attempting to control rioters at close quarters. Plastic baton rounds have allowed the police and the Army to keep a distance between themselves and other lethal missiles. Alternatives methods of riot control have been employed and considered but have generally proved less effective in Northern Ireland conditions.

While the Government acknowledge that the use of plastic baton rounds give rise to considerable controversy, no-one has yet been able to suggest a viable alternative which meets the operational needs of the security forces.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Nairobi Office

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what is the total annual cost to her Department of its office in Nairobi; and if she will break down the figures into *(a)* staff and *(b)* other costs. [68097]

Clare Short: The total annual cost of the DFID Eastern Africa office in Nairobi is £2.87 million. The office is responsible for both the policy and implementation of development programmes for Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania to a combined value of £132 million (1999–2000).

The estimated costs for 1999–2000 are broken down as follows:

(a) Staff costs including house and other personnel overheads: £2 million

(b) Other costs including office accommodation equipment, travel, etc: £870,000

Commonwealth Development Corporation

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if her Department's budget in the financial year 1999–2000 includes any expected proceeds from the sale of the Commonwealth Development Corporation. [68086]

Clare Short: I refer to my reply to the hon. Member on 2 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *301*. There was no expectation of any proceeds in 1999–2000. As I have made clear, the figures for the development budget announced at the time of the Comprehensive Spending Review took account of some of the anticipated proceeds in subsequent years from the sale of the Commonwealth Development Corporation. However, if the proceeds were not realised in full, the development budget would nevertheless be maintained at the levels announced for 1999–2000 to 2001–02.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what measures the Commonwealth Development Corporation will take to increase its return to investors following the introduction of the public/private partnership arrangements. [68102]

Clare Short: The Commonwealth Development Corporation (CDC) intends to achieve an increase in its investment returns, in part, through continuing the shift to equity investments. CDC's method of working, which relies on close management of equity positions, also improves its ability to identify and pursue good investments.

Rwanda

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment her Department has made of the need for post-trauma counselling in Rwanda. [68101]

Clare Short: We have not been directly involved in assessing the need for post-trauma counselling although other donors, including United Nations Children's Fund, have been involved in this important area. Rwanda is a deeply traumatised society. The Rwandan Government's reconciliation agenda recognises this. The partnership we are developing with the Government is focused on the provision of long-term, flexible financing in support of this agenda. The objectives of our support are set out in my letter of 26 January to my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King), a copy of which is in the Library of the House.

Somalia

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment her Department has made of the humanitarian needs arising in Somalia. [68100]

Clare Short: The UN 1999 Consolidated Appeal for Somalia estimates that at least one million people will need emergency assistance, of whom more than 300,000 are at high risk. The main challenge is to prevent the deteriorating food situation in the south developing into a famine. I have recently agreed a £300,000 contribution towards United Nations Children's Fund supplementary feeding programmes in the area. The EC have provided 10,899 metric tonnes of food at a cost of £6 million which includes a UK contribution of £1.2 million.

The World Food Programme have sufficient food stocks to last until March and we will continue to monitor the situation closely.

Departmental Employees

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many people were employed directly by her Department on *(a)* 1 September 1998 and *(b)* 1 January 1999. [68084]

Clare Short: The Department for International Development employed directly the following:

Date	*Numbers of staff*
(a) September 1998	1,095
(b) January 1999	1,130

These figures do not include staff employed on contract terms both in the UK and overseas.

Sudan

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department is taking in response to the humanitarian crisis in Sudan. [68099]

Clare Short: We have continued to be a key donor to the 1998 crisis. The World Food Programme currently holds enough stocks until the end of March. We have pressed the UN system to increase efficiency and effectiveness by producing an appeal for 1999 which is realistic and focused on humanitarian priorities and which makes full use of all delivery methods. The UN 1999 Consolidated Appeal was issued last week and we will

discuss it with other multilateral and bilateral donors at a meeting of the Operation Lifeline Sudan International Advisory Committee on 12 February.

We continue to press all parties to the civil war in Sudan to come to a negotiated settlement. Peace is the only long-term solution to the humanitarian crisis.

Departmental Responsibilities

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what responsibilities which her Department had prior to the Comprehensive Spending Review are to be *(a)* discontinued by her Department, *(b)* transferred to another department, *(c)* transferred to an executive agency and *(d)* added to her Department over the period 1998–99 to 2001–02. [68408]

Clare Short: The Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) looked rigorously at all of the Department's programmes to ensure they met the new Government's objectives. Changes were made to ensure that our resources are focused more explicitly on the overarching goal of eliminating poverty. Specifically:

(a) programmes and projects which did not meet our objectives were ended. For example, the Aid and Trade Provision.

(b) We concluded that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) should take full responsibility for the grant in aid to the British Council, previously shared between the Department for International Development (DFID) and FCO. This responsibility and expenditure provision has been transferred.

(c) Nil.

(d) The CSR endorsed the enhanced role for (DFID) set out the Government's White Paper on International Development. This includes promoting consistency in UK and international policies which affect poorer countries. In addition, the Department now gives greater emphasis to working with the international community towards agreed goals and to efforts to improve the effectiveness of the international system.

Colombia (Earthquake)

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department has taken to help the people of Colombia following the earthquake. [68569]

Clare Short: Our programme of support to the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs helped ensure that these agencies moved speedily to conduct initial damage and needs assessments following the severe earthquake on Colombia on 25 January. We have responded quickly to the appeal for assistance from the Government of Colombia by contributing US$1 million through humanitarian agencies. In addition, the European Community's Humanitarian Office has contributed $1.25 million, of which the UK share is $187,500.

Our funds are supporting the Pan-American Health Organisation to enable the deployment of epidemiology specialists, conduct damage assessment to health facilities, water and sewerage infrastructure and purchase medical supplies; the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to bring life-saving assistance to 100,000 people; Oxfam for a programme to provide drinking water for 80,000 people, as well as emergency shelter and household utensils, concentrating particularly on the poorer districts of the city of America and outlying towns; and United Nations Children's Fund to cover the immediate needs of children including those orphaned or separated from their families. Funds allocated to the British Embassy are providing urgently needed medicines and chemical toilets.

Inevitably a catastrophe of this nature and magnitude creates practical and logistical problems on the ground. Therefore, it is important that the relief is carefully targeted and effectively coordinated. We continue to work with the humanitarian agencies in Colombia and elsewhere to strengthen the international system to be better prepared and more effective in responding to disasters.

We are continuing to monitor the situation closely and remain ready to offer further assistance in Colombia to help with unmet priority needs that may emerge in coming days.

Nicaragua (Hurricane Mitch)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the assistance given by her Department to the relief effort in Nicaragua since Hurricane Mitch. [68454]

Clare Short: We have provided a grant to United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) for emergency repairs to water and sanitation infrastructure, and have agreed in principle a further grant to UNICEF to help restore primary health and education services. Regionally, we have given grants to the Pan-American Health Organisation to support national health authorities, principally for epidemic control, and to the United Nations Development Programme to support co-ordination.

We were instrumental in setting up the Trust Fund to help countries affected by Hurricane Mitch meet their debt service payments to international financial institutions, and have committed £10 million to this purpose. Together with other members of the Paris Club, the UK Government have agreed to a moratorium on Nicaragua's debt service payments for the next two years.

Coral Reefs

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps Her Majesty's Government have taken to aid the preservation of coral reefs since 1 July 1998. [66996]

Clare Short: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave him on 25 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *21*.

SCOTLAND

Ward Beds

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many ward beds were available in Edinburgh in 1995; how many ward beds will be available in Edinburgh upon the completion of the new Edinburgh Royal Infirmary; and what were the service costs for the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary for each of the years between 1990 and 1995. [65957]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 20 January 1999]:* The average number of available staffed in-patient beds in hospitals in the city of Edinburgh in 1995 to 1998 and the proposed number from 1999 to 2003 when the new Royal Infirmary will be completed are set out in the table.

Year[1]	*Acute beds*[2,3]	*Non-acute beds*[4]	*Total beds*
1995	1,901	2,591	4,492
1996	1,806	2,516	4,322
1997	1,631	2,462	4,093
1998	1,621	2,259	3,880
1999	1,623	2,269	3,892
2000	1,623	2,321	3,944
2001	1,617	2,313	3,930
2002	1,617	2,313	3,930
2003	1,557	2,264	3,821

The running costs for the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh for each of the years between 1990 and 1995 are set out in the table.

£000

Year ending 31 March	*Total hospital running costs*[5,6]
1990	48,984
1991	51,584
1992	66,169
1993	75,295
1994	88,780
1995	86,777

[1] Information provided by Lothian Health Board.
[2] Lothian Health Board's Acute Services Strategy proposes new patterns of health care and an increase in the provision of community health care services. The proposed number of acute beds (1999 onwards) has been determined by hospital doctors.
[3] 1995–97 data for acute services include winter beds.
[4] Lothian Health Board has been transferring resources to local authorities to provide 843 places in the community by the year 2003. These places are included in the non-acute bed numbers.
[5] Total hospital running costs reflect hospital operating expenses after netting off re-charges.
[6] There have been service transfers and some re-organisation at this site during the time period, including a change from Directly Managed Unit to Trust status.
Notes:
From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Lambs (Tagging)

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment he has made of the welfare implications of the requirement that farmers tag or tattoo all lambs for sale; what representations he has received on this issue; what discussions he has had with the European Union about this requirement; what estimate he has made of the additional cost to Scottish farmers of this requirement; what is the legal basis for this requirement; and for what reasons the requirement is being introduced. [68002]

Mr. Macdonald: EC Council Directive 92/102, which requires all sheep to be tagged or tattooed before they leave the holding of birth, was adopted in November 1992. The Directive requires Member States to establish a system of identifying and registering animals. The Scottish agricultural industry is being consulted on how best to meet this legal requirement. Questions about the practicality of unique tagging of animals, the costs associated with doing so and the necessary additional record-keeping involved have all been raised during the consultations and are under consideration. The flexibility allowed within the Directive as to when to apply the tag should help minimise welfare concerns. It is estimated that tagging sheep in according with the Directive could cost about approximately £2 million.

From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Organic Farming

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will estimate the amount of farmland *(a)* converted, *(b)* under conversion and *(c)* considering conversion to organic; what assessment he has made of future trends in this area; and if he will make a statement on the geographical spread of such land. [67765]

Mr. Macdonald: As at 31 December, there were 24,987 h.a. of converted organic land in Scotland as recorded by the United Kingdom Register of Organic Food Standards and 4,124 h.a. of land in conversion. Latest data on the number of farmers in Scotland receiving payments under the Scottish Organic Aid Scheme to convert to organic farming methods indicate there are currently around 53,000 h.a. entered into the Scheme, fairly evenly spread across the whole of the country. It is not possible to give numbers of those considering conversion. From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on his Department's strategy for helping Scottish farmers capitalise on the high demand for organic food in the UK; and if he will make a statement on current departmental initiatives in this area. [67748]

Mr. Macdonald: Farmers wishing to convert to organic farming methods can obtain assistance to do so from the Scottish Organic Aid Scheme and work is currently underway to introduce further improvements to the scheme. Assistance is also available to Scottish organic farmers to encourage better processing and marketing of their produce and organics are classed as a priority under the Scottish Processing and Marketing Grant Scheme. The Scottish Marketing Development Scheme is also available to help producers become more competitive and market orientated. From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Dounreay

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, pursuant to his answer of 14 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns *233–34*, on Dounreay what assessment he has made of the health dangers which could result from exposure of bait collectors to fuel fragments. [68139]

Mr. Galbraith: This matter was considered in the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) Report "Fragments of Irradiated Nuclear Fuel in the Dounreay Local Environment", which was referred to in the Answer of 14 January. That report took account of advice from the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) which, in

turn, was informed by work carried out by the Committee on Medical Aspects of Radiation in the Environment (COMARE).

The advice in the SEPA report was that the fuel fragments were not likely to affect the health of members of the public unless there was direct skin contact with, or accidental ingestion of, a fragment.

The effect of contact or ingestion would depend on the nature and length of contact with, and the activity of, the fragment. In the event of accidental contact with a fragment the effect could be some blistering of the skin and possible infection, unless the contact was prolonged. The effect of ingestion would depend on the activity of the fragment and whether it passed through the body or lodged in the gut. The immediate effects could range from no detectable effect to severe gastro-intestinal illness. In the longer term, the risks of developing a cancer could be marginally increased. The annual probability of bait collectors within the intertidal zone at Sandside beach making skin contact with a fragment was estimated at 1 in 200,000 in the SEPA report. There have been no known cases of bait collectors or any other member of the public coming into contact with particles.

From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

NHSnet

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, pursuant to his answer of 21 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *518*, on NHSnet, what assessment he has made of the number and proportion of hospital appointments being made through NHSnet; what the average waiting time is between placing a request for information on NHSnet and obtaining the information; and if he will make a statement. [68166]

Mr. Galbraith: The Government are committed to developing an electronic booking system by 2002 which will allow patients to know the date and time of any hospital outpatient appointment before leaving their GP surgery.

At present electronic appointment booking is taking place at a small number of pilot sites while a number of key building blocks are put in place to deliver this commitment, including:

Linking all NHS in Scotland organisations to the NHSnet

Electronic links between GPs and hospitals enabling the fast secure transmission of messages between primary and secondary care

Using the Community Health Index (CHI) number in all NHS computer bases systems to identify patients and relevant information about them whenever they are treated

Training for health care staff to carry out tasks using information technology

An appropriate form of assessment will be put into place as the system develops. From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Hospital Locums

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment he has made of agencies which provide locums for temporary employment in hospital trusts; and if he will make a statement. [67982]

Mr. Galbraith: No assessment has been made of agencies which provide locums for temporary employment in hospital trusts. From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to issue regulations governing the conduct of agencies which provide locums for temporary employment in hospital trusts; and if he will make a statement. [68340]

Mr. Galbraith: There are no plans to issue regulations governing the conduct of agencies which provide locums for temporary employment in hospital trusts. From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Farmers (Bank Borrowing)

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what estimate he has made of the total level of bank borrowing by Scotland's farmers in each of the last 10 years; and what discussions he has had with the NFU and the Scottish clearing banks on this matter. [68003]

Mr. Macdonald: The only comprehensive survey of bank lending to Scottish agriculture is conducted annually by the Scottish Office Agriculture, Environment and Fisheries Department. The results for the last ten years, in both current and at 1998 prices, are given in the following table.

Total advances to Scottish agriculture, 1989–98

£ million

Year (end-May)	*Advances* *Current prices*	*Real terms 1998 prices*
1989	909	1,292
1990	888	1,150
1991	884	1,083
1992	895	1,050
1993	868	1,006
1994	893	1,009
1995	893	976
1996	941	1,006
1997	966	1,007
1998	1,064	1,064

As the table shows, bank borrowings, in real terms, are now lower than they were 8 to 10 years ago, as are real interest rates.

Ministers and officials meet the National Farmers Union of Scotland and the agricultural representatives of the four Scottish Clearing banks on a regular basis to discuss a variety of issues affecting Scottish farming including the level of bank borrowings. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State last met the Scottish NFU on 22 December 1998 while my noble Friend Lord Sewel last met them on 22 January 1999. Officials last met the banks on 25 January 1999.

From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

DEFENCE

Armed Forces Pay Review Body

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the report and recommendations of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body. [68819]

Mr. George Robertson: The 1999 Report of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body has been published today. Copies are available in the Vote Office and the Library of the House. I am grateful to the Chairman and members of the Review Body for the work they have put into the report.

In the Comprehensive Spending Review the Government made it clear that public sector pay settlements would need to be fair, affordable and consistent with targets for public service improvements we have set. The new arrangements announced in the CSR for the Pay Review Bodies were designed to ensure a closer and more effective link between pay settlements, departmental expenditure limits and service delivery targets. Under these new arrangements, the AFPRB now reports to me, as responsible Departmental Minister, as well as to the Prime Minister. The Terms of Reference of the AFPRB were revised to ensure that, in making their recommendations, four key consideration set out in the CSR were taken into account:

recruitment, retention and motivation of the Armed Forces;

the requirements for departments to meet their output targets for the delivery of services;

requirement for departments to stay within their three-year expenditure limits;

the Government's inflation target, requiring responsibility in pay settlements across the public and private sectors.

The AFPRB has recommended an increase in basic military salary of about 3.5 per cent. for all ranks, with the exception of: Privates and Lance Corporals (and their equivalents) who should receive 3.6 per cent.; Lieutenants and Captains (and their equivalents) who should receive 3.7 per cent.; and Brigadiers (and their equivalents) who should receive 3.3 per cent. Additional Pay (eg Flying Pay and Submarine Pay) will also increase by 3.3 per cent.

I am satisfied that these recommendations take account of the four key considerations and will support the Services' strategies to achieve full manning. The additional cost of this settlement will be contained within my Department's expenditure limits announced in July and we will continue to meet the objectives and targets set out in my Public Service Agreements. This is in line with the Government's prudent and disciplined approach to public spending and its commitment to delivering high quality public services and low inflation.

The AFPRB's recommendations are to be accepted in full, with implementation effective from 1 April 1999.

Gulf War Syndrome

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what consultations the Government have had with other Governments on the subject of research and evidence of Gulf War Syndrome. [64997]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Ministry of Defence continues to liaise closely with the US Government on all aspects of Gulf veterans' illnesses. These links are of particular importance because the USA has the largest population of Gulf veterans—some 700,000 US personnel deployed to the Gulf in 1990–91—and there is a substantial federally funded research programme underway there.

My predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, North and Bellshill (Dr. Reid), visited the US in October 1997 to discuss Gulf veterans' illnesses issues and I intend to visit the US myself later this year to see at first hand how the US Government are responding to this complex and difficult problem and to discuss the way forward. The MOD has a full time Gulf Health Liaison Officer based in Washington, who works on a daily basis with US federal agencies and research teams. In addition, the UK is represented on the US Persian Gulf veterans Co-ordinating Board Research Working Group, which oversees all US federal research looking at Gulf veterans' illnesses, in order that the UK can have full visibility of that research, both to keep abreast of the latest developments and to avoid duplication of effort. In the course of dealing with this subject, MOD officials have also discussed Gulf veterans' illnesses issues with officials and researchers from a number of other counties, including France, Canada, the Netherlands and Denmark.

The MOD continues to monitor all published research which may be relevant to the issue of Gulf veterans' illnesses. In June last year, my Department announced that it would be funding an independent systematic literature review of worldwide published research relating to Gulf veterans' illnesses. The review, commissioned through the Medical Research Council (MRC), will be carried out over a period of 3 years by a team led by Professor Glyn Lewis at the University of Wales School of Medicine in Cardiff. The findings of the review will be published at six-monthly intervals. An initial report to the MRC is expected in the Spring, with the first full report likely to be published in Autumn.

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many British Gulf War veterans have subsequently tested positive for depleted uranium poisoning having not exhibited symptoms during examination by Medical Assessment Programme physicians which indicated a requirement for a specific referral to another agency or organisation for depleted uranium testing. [65974]

Mr. Doug Henderson: In general, the Ministry of Defence has no knowledge of any tests, including those to detect the presence of DU, which may have been carried out on Gulf veterans independently of the Gulf veterans' Medical Assessment Programme (MAP), through other organisations providing medical or radiological services. However, the Ministry of Defence is aware that a US physician is reported as having carried out tests for the presence of DU on some UK Gulf veterans. So far, however, my Department has not received any details of the methodology behind the tests which have been performed or of the results reportedly obtained. Hence, at present, the MOD is not able to comment on these reported findings.

Nevertheless, as I explained in my reply of 16 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *521*, I have asked my officials to collate the information which the

MOD possesses concerning mechanisms which could be used to test for the presence of uranium in the human body. I expect to publish this work shortly, and shall make arrangements for copies to be placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reason the standard battery of tests routinely carried out on Medical Assessment Programme patients does not include a specific test to detect depleted uranium. [65973]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The medical programme which became the Gulf veterans' Medical Assessment Programme (MAP) was set up in July 1993 in order to examine veterans who were unwell and who believed their illness was related to their service in the Gulf. The intention was to provide a diagnosis wherever possible and to document all illness in veterans referred to the Programme. A veteran referred to the Programme was examined by a Consultant Physician and a number of tests and examinations were carried out. This essentially remains the case today.

When the Programme was first established, Wg Cdr (now Gp Capt) Bill Coker (who ran it until December 1996) initially carried out those tests he felt necessary on clinical grounds to establish a diagnosis. When the number of patients referred to the MAP increased, he carried out a number of screening tests, similar to those then used by the US Department of Defense's Comprehensive Clinical Evaluation Programme (the US DoD's equivalent to the MAP). These screening tests did not include a test to detect the presence of uranium because Gp Capt Coker had not previously seen any features in patients to indicate that such testing was clinically necessary. The US experience had suggested that the urinary excretion of uranium was only significantly increased in those veterans with retained DU fragments. As MOD was not aware of any UK Service personnel who had sustained shrapnel injuries from DU-based ammunition, it was not thought appropriate to screen routinely for uranium excretion, although testing could be carried out on a case by case basis if clinically indicated. Any other tests considered clinically appropriate would also be performed, these additional tests varying from patient to patient. This system of investigation was in place at the time of the Royal College of Physicians' (RCP) clinical audit in 1995.

The RCP's subsequent report, published in July 1995, endorsed the MAP's professional independence and integrity and made specific comments on how the Programme could be improved. However, with the exception of a recommendation concerning psychiatric assessments, the RCP did not recommend any changes to the tests and examinations carried out by the MAP.

The baseline tests currently carried out on MAP patients by St. Thomas' Hospital on the MAP's behalf are very similar to those which were in place at the time of the RCP audit in 1995. They are as follows:

Full blood count and sedimentation rate (FBC/ESR)
Full biochemical screen, including renal function tests (urea, electrolytes and creatinine) liver function tests (LFT), calcium and blood sugar
Immunoglobulin analysis
Creatine kinase
Thyroid function tests (TFT)
Serological screening tests
Chest X-ray (CXR)
Ultrasound abdominal scan
Electrocardiogram (ECG)
Urinalysis
Peak-flow lung measurement (to determine the necessity for vitalography)

A thorough audit of the MAP is currently under way. It is looking at all aspects of patient care and the service provided by the MAP. The range of tests and examinations currently undertaken at the MAP will be reviewed in the light of the results of this audit process.

I should stress that the tests listed are only baseline investigations; additional and/or referrals to other consultants/specialists are sometimes required. Any tests which are considered clinically appropriate by the examining MAP physician, including those to detect the presence of uranium, will be arranged, as I explained in my reply of 16 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *521*.

In the same answer, I also announced that I had asked my officials to collate the information which the MOD possesses concerning mechanisms which could be used to test for the presence of uranium in the human body. I expect to publish this work shortly, and shall make arrangements for copies to be placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what research has been conducted into Aspartame as a possible cause of Gulf War Syndrome; [66676]

(2) what evidence he has assessed of a possible link between Aspartame and Gulf War Syndrome. [66675]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Ministry of Defence is aware that Aspartame, an artificial sweetener, has been suggested as a possible cause of the illnesses being experienced by some Gulf veterans. However, this is only one of many such suggestions in this context and my Department is not aware of any published scientific evidence to support this theory. So far as the Ministry of Defence is aware, no specific research is being conducted to investigate a possible relationship between the consumption of Aspartame and Gulf veterans' illnesses.

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if research on exposure of military personnel to organophosphates in the Gulf War has been completed; and whether it will be published. [67477]

Mr. Doug Henderson: When it became apparent that organophosphate (OP) pesticides had been more widely used by UK forces during the Gulf conflict than had previously been thought, the Ministry of Defence carried out an urgent investigation into the circumstances in

which they had been used. The investigation team's report was published on 10 December 1996. Copies of this report were placed in the Library of the House. Broadly, the team found that OP pesticides were, in the main, used properly by personnel who are trained in the safe use of such products, including the wearing of Personal Protective Equipment.

The Ministry of Defence is currently funding a programme of research into different aspects of Gulf veterans' illnesses. None of these studies is specifically aimed at investigating a possible relationship between exposure to OP pesticides and such illnesses.

Research to investigate the effects of low level exposure to OP pesticides in the context of the health concerns of farm workers, funded jointly by the Department of Health, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) and the Health and Safety Executive, is well under way at the Institute of Occupational Medicine in Edinburgh. This will be an important step towards understanding the possible effects of potential exposures during the Gulf conflict. Final data analysis is currently taking place and the study as a whole is expected to be completed in April this year. The study team's report is expected later in the Summer. The MAFF is also currently funding a study at the Chemical and Biological Defence Sector of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) at Porton Down to determine whether a low dose of the OP diazinon will give rise to adverse long term effects.

RN Hospital, Haslar

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many consultants, employed by his Department, *(a)* work and *(b)* are based for the majority of their time at the RN Hospital, Haslar. [65779]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to him by the Chief Executive of the Defence Secondary Care Agency on 12 January 1999, *Official Report,* columns *146–47.* All those listed are consultants with the exception of the Civilian Medical Practitioners, Specialist Registrars, Senior House Officers and Pre Registration House Officers.

All those listed work and are based at the Royal Hospital Haslar for the majority of their time.

Military Training

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will make a statement on the status of military schools and the means by which students in such schools are able to leave before completion of their studies; [66064]

(2) if military training comes under Ministry of Defence regulations with respect to notice periods and payments. [66065]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Astute Class (Submarines)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the crew number of the Astute Class of submarines. [66165]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The first 3 Astute Class submarines, out of a planned class of 5, are being designed and built under a Prime Contract awarded to GEC-Marconi in March 1997 with delivery expected in the middle of the next decade. Design work continues and the normal sea going complement is currently expected to be 98, although the submarine should be capable of taking up to 109 personnel to sea when required.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what budget has been allocated within his Department to deal with the millennium bug. [66881]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 21 January 1999]:* The estimated additional cost of the total Year 2000 programme within MOD is £200m, which is being found from within existing defence provision by the rescheduling of other tasks. This sum does not include the cost of replacing or upgrading systems as part of a planned program.

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what percentage of his Department's systems are currently not millennium compliant. [66751]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 21 January 1999]:* Work to date has concentrated on identifying which MOD equipments are critical to our Defence capability, and ensuring that these systems will be compliant. Currently, around 60 per cent. of such systems are reported as compliant and programmes are in place to ensure that the remaining business critical systems are made compliant in good time.

Accommodation

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if it is his policy to provide single accommodation for all single service personnel. [66745]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 21 January 1999]:* When we published the outcome of the Strategic Defence Review the supporting White Paper entitled "A Policy for People" stated that:

"In future, new single accommodation will be built so that, in most instances, individuals of all ranks will be provided with a single room. There are plans in place now to raise the standard of some existing single living accommodation, and we have initiated a survey of all single living accommodation to inform our longer term aspiration to improve the whole estate."

The Chief Executive of the Defence Estate Organisation is leading a study of the optimum approach to our single living accommodation improvement programme, which should report later this year. Our plans recognise the diverse needs and circumstances of our Service men and women and, whilst we aspire to single rooms for the majority, team-based accommodation may be more appropriate for some.

CS Sprays

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the names of the solvents which are used in CS sprays held by his Department. [67598]

Mr. Spellar: All the CS sprays currently held by the Ministry of Defence contain the solvent commonly known as methylene chloride.

Non-lethal Warfare

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what co-operation there is between Britain and the United States of America on non-lethal warfare; how many collaboration agreements have been signed with the United States of America; what are the names of these agreements; when the agreements were signed and for what reasons; and if he will make a statement. [67599]

Mr. Spellar: On 18 November 1994, the UK and US Defence Secretaries signed a UK-US Master Information Exchange Memorandum of Understanding on the subject of non-lethal weapons. The first information exchange, which covers "Non-lethal weapons systems", was signed on 2 February 1998.

International collaboration agreements help to inform our decisions on future strategies and equipment, as well as improving interoperability with our Allies and coalition partners.

Military Airfields (Private Companies)

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence under what circumstances private companies may export goods by air from military airfields. [68197]

Mr. Spellar: A private company wishing to export goods requires prior permission from HM Customs if the aircraft is to fly to a non-EU country from any UK airfield. The same rules apply regardless of whether the airfield is military or civilian.

Nitroglycerine

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the advantages of the retention of a United Kingdom based capability to manufacture nitroglycerine. [68077]

Mr. Spellar: There are nitroglycerine manufacturing facilities currently operating at the Royal Ordnance factories at Summerfield and Bishopton. The retention of an indigenous capability to manufacture multi-based ammunition propellants, of which nitroglycerine is a part, were considered very carefully as part of the Modular Charge System contract decision.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions he has had with the management of British Aerospace concerning the maintenance of a nitroglycerine manufacturing facility in the United Kingdom. [68078]

Mr. Spellar: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence has met with the management of British Aerospace on a number of occasions since May 1997. The maintenance of a nitroglycerine manufacturing facility in the United Kingdom has not been a topic of discussion.

Project ASH

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what has been the cost to date of Project ASH; to whom the contract was originally let; which companies have subsequently been involved; when the database and management aid for handling unexploded ordnance will be in service; and if he will make a statement. [68074]

Mr. Spellar: The cost to date of Project ASH is around £2.7m including VAT. A contract for development and production was placed with EDS Defence Ltd. in November 1994. Other companies which have been involved are Bactec International Ltd., for database population, VEGA Group PLC, providing technical support to the Ministry of Defence Procurement Executive, and Thompson-Thorn Missile Electronics Ltd., who are conducting work on training needs. Although ASH was accepted into service in October 1996, further work was required to be done to the database and for management aid for handling unexploded ordnance. Following user trials in February 1999 it is expected that an improved version of ASH will be accepted and subsequently deployed to Bosnia to assist Army Explosive Ordnance Disposal teams.

Scottish Procurement

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much his Department spent in Scotland on defence procurement in the last year for which figures are available; how much of that was passed to sub-contractors *(a)* in total and *(b)* as a percentage of the total; and what estimate he has made of the percentage of sub-contracted work which remains in Scotland. [68076]

Mr. Spellar: The MOD spent £550 million, VAT-exclusive; to the nearest £50 million, on defence equipment from contractors based in Scotland during 1996–97. The MOD does not record payments made to sub-contractors and has not made an estimate of what those payments might be.

Propellants

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the munitions currently used by Her Majesty's forces which are propelled by products from Royal Ordnance, Bishopton; and what steps have been taken by his Department to secure supplies of propellants following the end of production at Royal Ordnance, Bishopton. [68080]

Mr. Spellar: The Armed Forces use propellant produced at Royal Ordnance Bishopton to fire a range of 105mm and 155mm artillery projectiles and 120mm tank projectiles, the Naval 4.5" Gun and rocket motors for the Royal Navy's Sea Wolf and Sea Skua missiles. It also produces raw propellant material used in a number of in-service missiles and small calibre ammunition manufactured at other locations. We have considered carefully the future supply of propellants currently made at Royal Ordnance Bishopton and are satisfied that, where necessary, sufficient and reliable alternative sources exist overseas to meet future MOD requirements should the facility close. Royal Ordnance remain responsible for meeting all its commitments under existing contracts with the MOD.

Sully Hospital (Land Decontamination)

Mr. John Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what plans he has to authorise decontamination works on his Department's land at Sully Hospital in the Vale of Glamorgan; [67861]

(2) what assessment he has made of the health and public safety risks associated with *(a)* the contamination of his Department's land adjacent to Sully Hospital in the Vale of Glamorgan and *(b)* the works required to decontaminate that land; [67864]

(3) what is the nature and extent of the contamination of his Department's land adjacent to Sully Hospital in the Vale of Glamorgan; [67860]

(4) what assessment he has made of *(a)* the work required to decontaminate his Department's land adjacent to Sully Hospital in the Vale of Glamorgan and *(b)* its cost. [67862]

Mr. Spellar: A Land Quality Assessment is being commissioned by the Oil Pipelines Agency to determine whether the Ministry of Defence land adjacent to Sully Hospital is contaminated and, if so, the extent of the contamination. It is expected that the outcome of the Assessment will be known by the end of the year.

Panzer Tank (Disposal)

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reasons a German Panzer IV/70(V) was disposed of from the Royal Military College of Science, Shrivenham, in August 1998; what other examples there are of this tank in other *(a)* national or local museums and *(b)* military establishments; and what was the disposal price of the tank. [68211]

Mr. Spellar: The Royal Military College of Science, Shrivenham did not dispose of a German Panzer IV/70(V) tank in 1998. The only complete example of a Panzer MkIV in the UK held by us is at the Tank Museum, Bovington. The Imperial War Museum has a cut down (incomplete) example of the Panzer MkIV but neither is an example of the 70(V) variant (there are ten variants of the Panzer MkIV including the 70(V). There are no examples of the Panzer MkIV/70(V) held at military establishments.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Lottery Grants (Barnsley)

11. **Mr. Illsley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what proposals he has which would increase the distribution of lottery grants to Barnsley. [66770]

Mr. Chris Smith: I want Lottery money to address the needs of communities across the whole of the United Kingdom. I welcome the National Lottery Charities Board's designation of Barnsley as a priority area for Lottery funding and will follow the progress of this initiative closely. I have also launched with the distributing bodies an investigation into the reasons for low take-up of Lottery funding in coalfield areas.

25. **Mr. Bill O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received following his meeting with local authorities in Barnsley last autumn when the equalisation of National Lottery grants was discussed; and if he will make a statement. [66784]

Mr. Chris Smith: Representatives from the coalfields areas have confirmed the need for action to address the problems these areas face in obtaining Lottery funding and have supported the measures announced at the Coalfields Lottery Conference to address the balance.

I welcome the National Lottery Charities Board's designation of Barnsley as a priority area for Lottery funding and will follow the progress of this initiative closely. I have also launched with the distributing bodies an investigation into the reasons for low take-up of Lottery funding in coalfield areas.

Channel 4

12. **Mr. Baker:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on Government plans for Channel 4. [66771]

Janet Anderson: Channel Four is a central element in the Government's vision for the broadcasting industry in the digital future. I expect it to continue to provide a vital role in providing distinctive and innovative public service programming of high quality.

Architectural Design

14. **Mr. McNulty:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what progress he has made in implementing proposals to establish a national body to champion British architectural design. [66774]

Mr. Alan Howarth: We have advertised for a Chairman for the new body. We have set up an Implementation Group of seven people which will be able to present its conclusions to the Chairman on his or her appointment. The new body should be fully operational in the autumn.

Social Exclusion

15. **Mr. Rammell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what progress has been made by the policy action team on the contribution that sports and the arts can make to tackling social exclusion. [66775]

Mr. Chris Smith: Policy Action Team 10, led by DCMS, has met on several occasions. The Team includes a number of people engaged in local projects tackling issues of social inclusion, and experts on specific issues such as funding, building partnerships and community development. The group has undertaken visits to successful arts and sporting projects which are combating social exclusion around the country. The Team will report in early summer 1999 on its findings.

Seaside Resorts

16. **Mr. Loughton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what support he has given to the tourism industry in seaside resorts. [66776]

Janet Anderson: Of the £3.8 billion of Single Regeneration Budget funding available over the next three years, 44 of the bids included proposals for the regeneration of seaside resorts. But the future of our seaside resorts depends on all those involved in both private and public sectors working together to develop the sort of products now needed and with the quality and value for money which visitors expect.

Our strategy for tourism, to be published on 26 February 1999, addresses this important industry sector and will help create the right framework in which tourism can flourish.

Departmental Spending (Administration)

17. **Mr. Dawson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to reduce his Department's spending on administration. [66777]

Mr. Chris Smith: My Department is committed to reducing its running costs as a proportion of its Department Expenditure Limit (DEL).

Public Art (Economic Regeneration)

18. **Mr. Blizzard:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the role of public art in economic regeneration. [66778]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The Arts Council of England is currently carrying out an independent evaluation of Lottery funded public art commissions. I am in no doubt, however, of the ability of public art to improve the urban landscape, enhance local neighbourhood identity, encourage inward investment, create local employment and develop skills through programmes of participation, education and training.

National Lottery

19. **Mr. Barnes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on Camelot's plans for the National Lottery in December 1999 and January 2000. [66779]

Mr. Chris Smith: Decisions on licensing new Lottery draws and games are for the Director General of the National Lottery or, after 1 April 1999, the National Lottery Commissioners. I understand that the Director General has not received any applications from Camelot to run new Lottery games in December 1999 or January 2000.

School Sport

20. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the playing of sports in schools. [66794]

Mr. Banks: Sport in schools is essential for a broad and balanced education to which all children are entitled.

I want schools to provide more opportunities for their pupils to take part in sporting activities. It is important that young people have access to a range of physical activities within and beyond the school curriculum.

Sport in schools is a key feature of our sport strategy paper and we are collaborating with the Department for Education and Employment, who have sole responsibility for the National Curriculum, to determine how school sporting activities can best be focused and supported. We have invigorated a range of initiatives to achieve this; these include the Sportsmark award scheme for high quality school sport, a new scheme for primary schools, the Sporting Ambassadors programme of visits to schools by prominent sportsmen and women and Study Support for example in Premier League Football Clubs. We have also fed into the current review of the National Curriculum by the QCA.

Arts (Access)

21. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what policies his Department is pursuing to increase access to the arts for people on modest incomes. [66780]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The many activities which my Department supports have a fundamental impact on an individual's quality of life. Increasing access to the arts continues to be at the heart of our policy. Through the New Audiences Fund, more than 100 pilot schemes which increase access to a wide range of art forms have already benefited from over £3 million in additional project funding. Many arts events are now more affordable for those with modest or no income. Further grants from the New Audiences Fund, totalling over £1 million, will be announced later this month.

QUEST

22. **Mr. Hepburn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps he is taking to ensure value for money and best practice in bodies sponsored by his Department. [66781]

Mr. Chris Smith: I announced in December the establishment of the Quality, Efficiency and Standards Team (QUEST) to provide independent advice on the improvement of performance across all our sectors and to disseminate good practice. This will be in addition to the existing oversight of NDPBs exercised by my Department.

23. **Dr. Starkey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what areas of responsibility will be covered by QUEST. [66782]

Mr. Chris Smith: QUEST's role will be to improve and sustain quality, standards and performance in all the fields for which my Department is responsible.

Tourism Strategy

24. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps he is taking to ensure that each region of the UK benefits from the tourism industry. [66783]

Janet Anderson: The new strategy for tourism which we shall publish on 26 February 1999 will help create the right framework in which tourism can flourish. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will have their own strategies, reflecting differing regional priorities.

Within England, as I announced on 14 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *352*, following our Comprehensive Spending Review, there will be a transformed national tourism body and more resources will be used for support of tourism in the regions. The Regional Tourist Boards, working with their commercial members, local authorities and the Regional Development Agencies will together deliver the economic, environmental and social benefits well-managed and appropriately delivered tourism can bring to each region.

Local Theatres

27. **Mr. Amess:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to bring forward proposals to change the funding of local theatres through the Art Board. [66786]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The Government believe strongly in delegation. The new Arts Council which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State appointed last year shares that view and has already proposed that a substantial element of the extra resources for the arts that the Government are providing should be delegated to the Regional Arts Boards. It will be for the Regional Arts Boards to take decisions on the funding for specific artforms or organisations within their regions, including theatre.

Wembley Stadium

28. **Mr. Pike:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what role his Department will play in the development of the new Wembley stadium and related infrastructure. [66787]

Mr. Banks: I am keeping a very close eye on progress with the development of the new National Stadium, although my Department has no direct role in funding or constructing the stadium and relating infrastructure. The project is central to our plans to bring the major international sporting events to this country.

Millennium Dome (Waste Disposal)

33. **Mr. Keith Simpson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on plans for waste disposal at the dome. [66792]

Janet Anderson: The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) has implemented a number of procedures for controlling waste during the construction phase of the dome. All contractors are required to specify waste management practices within their tender documentation, and implementation of these practices is assessed by weekly inspections and spot checks.

During the year of the Millennium Experience, NMEC will adopt a waste management strategy based on the concepts of waste reduction, re-use, recycling and efficient removal from the site. NMEC is currently investigating supply strategies that will minimise the quantity of packaging coming onto the site, but will then provide facilities to allow separation of those major waste streams that are generated in order that they can be processed or recycled efficiently.

The final details of the operational strategy will be defined with the assistance of site caterers who are likely to have the greatest impact on waste generation. However, where it is practical to do so, NMEC's catering strategy will encourage use of re-usable cutlery and crockery. Where this is not possible caterers will aim to use cutlery and crockery made from recycled or recyclable materials.

Millennium Dome (Concessionary Fares)

34. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with the New Millennium Experience Company with a view to developing special concessionary fares and entry/travel packages for families and frequent visitors to the dome. [66793]

Janet Anderson: The New Millennium Experience Company aims to ensure that as many people as possible can, if they wish, visit the dome at Greenwich. In developing the ticket pricing strategy the Company has been concerned to include attractive discounts for a number of groups. The Company has also been in discussion for a number of months with the travel trade and I am confident that these discussions will result in combined travel and dome admission packages from all parts of the UK.

Millennium Dome (Expenditure)

35. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement about parliamentary accountability for expenditure on the Millennium Dome. [66795]

Mr. Chris Smith: My noble Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office is the sole shareholder of the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) on behalf of the Government and is therefore accountable to Parliament for the Company's overall performance. I will be answering to this House on all matters relating to my noble Friend's responsibilities in respect of the NMEC.

At official level, the arrangements for parliamentary accountability for expenditure on the dome mirror those which apply to all non-departmental public bodies. The Company's Chief Executive was appointed, by the Permanent Secretary of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, as Accounting Officer for the dome. She is therefore personally responsible to Parliament for use of the company's money.

The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) is not of course, in receipt of Exchequer funds. It receives Lottery funding from the Millennium Commission. The Director of the Millennium Commission has formal Accounting Officer responsibility for the Commission's use of Lottery money. In addition, the DCMS Permanent Secretary, as Accounting Officer for the National Lottery Development Fund has responsibilities in respect of the overall use of Lottery funds.

Landmark Millennium Projects

36. **Mr. Flight:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent discussions he has had with the organisers of the 23 landmark millennium projects about sponsorship money. [66797]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Millennium Commission, which I chair, makes it a condition of grant to capital projects that at least 50 per cent. of the total project cost is raised through partnership funding, and this includes sponsorship in some cases. The Commission works closely with each project and is therefore involved in ongoing discussions about matched funding.

Dance (Scotland)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has held

with the Scottish Office on the funding of dance following the takeover of responsibility by the Scottish Parliament. [66773]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Support for the arts in Scotland is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland.

Football Task Force

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he expects the football task force to publish its report on the commercial aspects of the game. [66785]

Mr. Banks: I have been told the report will be ready by the end of March 1999.

Millennium Dome (Life-span)

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what is the expected life of the millennium dome. [66791]

Mr. Chris Smith: The structural steelwork of the dome has a life-span of at least 60 years; and the roofing material is expected to last at least 25 years before major maintenance is necessary.

English National Stadium Development Company

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if he will make a statement on the role of the English National Stadium Development Company; [67556]

(2) if he will list the directors and trustees who sit on the English National Stadium Development Company Board; [67557]

(3) if he will list the terms of reference and details of the funding of the English National Stadium Development Company. [67558]

Mr. Banks *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* The English National Stadium Development Company is the FA vehicle charged with creating a national stadium for football, rugby league and athletics, and required to meet the technical requirements for those sports under the Lottery Funding Agreement with the English Sports Council. The current estimate for the total cost of the project is £320m, of which £120m will be funded by the Lottery, the remainder by debt financing by the FA. Membership of the Development Company Board is as follows:

Chairman:

Ken Bates

Members:

Sir David Hill Wood
David Richards
David Sheepshanks
Geoff Thompson
Lord Harris
Ernie Walker
Sir Rodney Walker
Ian Peacock
Nicholas Coward
Michael Cunnah

Sponsorship Sports

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer of 14 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *350–51*, how many times his expert group on tobacco sponsorship and alternative sponsorship has met; who its members are; how many times he expects it to meet in 1999; when he expects to receive its conclusions; and when he expects to report his response to its conclusions to the House. [R] [67138]

Mr. Banks *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* The group of experts met twice last year and members are now holding individual meetings with the seven sports which have sought our assistance to find alternative sponsors. To date these meetings have been very constructive. The meetings will be completed by the end of this month, after which the group will meet again to receive a report and to consider the nature and timing of help needed to replace existing contracts, many of which have several years to run. We will also consider the frequency of further meetings this year. I will keep the House advised of all significant developments.

The terms of reference of the Task Force are:

to assist sports currently in receipt of tobacco sponsorship to find replacement sponsors by:

assessing the needs of each sport;

offering advice on best practice in establishing commercial relationships with sponsors; and,

assisting the sports in making links with potential new sponsors.

Membership is:

Tony Banks (Chairman)—Minister for Sport

Gordon McCallum—Virgin Group

Jon Smith—First Artist Corporation

Maurice Lindsay—Central Council for Physical Recreation

Mike Reynolds—Institute of Sports Sponsorship

Derek Etherington—DCMS Sports Sponsorship Consultant

New Opportunities Fund (ICT Training)

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport who prepared the specification of the skills training for the use by schools for information and communications technology funded by New Opportunities Fund moneys; and which bodies were consulted on the specification. [67390]

Mr. Banks *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* A set of expected outcomes for the training have been developed that focus on the information and communication technology (ICT) knowledge, understanding and skills that teachers need to support their teaching. The outcomes are based on the new Initial Teacher Training National Curriculum, which was developed by the Teacher Training Agency. The outcomes also reflect national guidelines and in-service training in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The expected outcomes include an understanding of how to use ICT in teaching the whole class; planning, including the use of ICT for lesson preparation; and assessing pupils' work when ICT has been used.

Arts Guide (Millennium Year)

Mr. Berry: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if his Department will ensure the

production of a guide on access for disabled people to arts, entertainment and leisure venues for the millennium year. [67139]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* Increasing access to the arts is a key aim for my Department. Our commitment to access and equality of opportunity for disabled people is strong and my Department is keen to ensure that there is adequate information for disabled people on all the activities which we support and fund.

There are already a number of useful guides for people with disabilities, some of which are published by Government Departments. The Department of Health has recently updated "A Practical Guide for Disabled People", which includes details of organisations which can offer advice on access to arts and leisure facilities, tourist accommodation and sports facilities. The Arts Council's publication "Arts and Disability" includes a chapter on access and details of useful contacts, including regional Access Committees, Trusts and voluntary organisations. Regional and voluntary organisations such as "Artsline" in London also offer invaluable advice.

My Department will keep under review the availability of appropriate advice for disabled people in relation to our sectors, taking into account the implications of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and of our new policy initiatives.

Chess

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what funding the Government gave to promoting and running chess for *(a)* young people and *(b)* adults in each of the last five years. [67058]

Mr. Banks *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* Since my Department took over responsibility for funding chess in 1996–97, the Government has invested £49,000 each year to help the British Chess Federation (BCF) promote the development of Chess. Expenditure by the BCF on junior chess and other initiatives, from the funding provided by my Department, is as follows:

£

	1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Junior chess development	14,542	16,180	13,870
Other initiatives	34,458	32,820	35,130

An analysis for earlier years is not available. Whilst I am pleased that funding from my Department has been able to support initiatives specifically related to junior chess development, it has also been able to contribute to and benefit all age groups.

Royal Society of Literature

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he plans to reply to the question tabled by the right hon. Member for South-West Surrey on 11 January, concerning the Royal Society of Literature. [68311]

Mr. Alan Howarth: I replied to the right hon. Member on 27 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *264*.

English Sports Council

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he expects to announce the appointment of a new chairman for the English Sports Council. [68115]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 28 January 1999]:* We advertised for a new Chair for the English Sports Council last September. We received an excellent response, and have been carefully considering the candidates in accordance with the procedures laid down by the Commissioner for Public Appointments. We will announce who is to be appointed as soon as we have finished the selection process.

Tourism (Devon)

Sir Peter Emery: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps his Department will take to ensure that the tourist industry in Devon is supported by the RDA for the West Country. [68081]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 28 January 1999]:* As our strategy for tourism will set out, the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), Regional Tourist Boards, local authorities and other tourism partners will together deliver the economic, environmental and social benefits that well-managed and appropriately developed tourism can bring to each region.

Because of the significant economic importance of tourism there is representation of tourism specialists on the RDA boards, including that of the South West RDA.

UK Sports Institute

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has held with the British Olympic Committee about the UK Sports Institute. [68114]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 28 January 1999]:* My hon. Friend the Minister for Sport regularly has meetings with Craig Reedie, Chairman of the British Olympic Association, to discuss a wide range of issues including the UK Sports Institute.

The BOA have a significant role to play in the development and success of the UK Sports Institute. Mr. Reedie is also deputy chairman of the UK Sports Council which is responsible for giving strategic direction to the UK Sports Institute. He is also a member of the newly formed UK Sports Institute Implementation Committee charged with the task of overseeing the development of the UK Sports Institute Headquarters.

Staff of the BOA are closely involved with UK Sports Institute Development Groups, UK and Home County Sports Council staff, and Governing Bodies of sport, in developing the services that the UK Sports Institute will deliver to elite performers.

Television Licences

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the cost of proposals to abolish the payment of television licence fees by old age pensioners; and if he will make a statement. [67928]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 28 January 1999]:* The estimated cost of providing free television licences for all pensioner only households would be £489 million a year. There are no plans at present for such a concession. The current review of the future of the BBC licence fee after 2002 will include a consideration of the current structure of the concessionary licence scheme and whether a suitable alternative structure could be available.

Tourism (North-West)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to increase financing to the North West Tourist Board. [68471]

Janet Anderson: On 14 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *352*, my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State announced the main decisions following the Departmental Spending Review. For tourism within England, these include a transformed national tourism body and more resources for the support of tourism in the regions.

A team and advisory group have been set up to oversee implementation of these new arrangements. They are considering the remit and structure of the body, the funding mechanisms for tourism support and the implications for Regional Tourist Boards.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

House of Lords

Mr. Borrow: To ask the President of the Council what representations she has received on the progress which has been made on reform of the House of Lords. [66798]

Mrs. Beckett: The publication of the Bill to remove the right of hereditary peers to sit and vote and the Government's White Paper on longer-term reform has been widely welcomed.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Speed Limits

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to extend the powers of local government to impose lower speed limits; and if he will make a statement. [66710]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Local Highway Authorities already have the power to set speed limits of more than 30 mph within the national speed limit without the need to obtain the consent of the Secretary of State. We shall be introducing legislation shortly aimed at allowing local highway authorities to introduce 20 mph speed limits without have to obtain consent. We will be issuing guidance to local highway authorities on the need for such limits to be combined with road engineering methods to ensure compliance.

Planning Inspectors

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many planning inspectors were in post on 1 January *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999. [67881]

Mr. Raynsford: The provision of information on the numbers of planning Inspectors is a matter for the Planning Inspectorate. I have therefore asked the Inspectorate's Chief Executive, Mr. Chris Shepley, to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Martin Brasher to Mr. Keith Vaz, dated 29 January 1999:

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has passed your Question about the number of Planning Inspectors to the Planning Inspectorate for reply. I am responding in Chris Shepley's absence on official business.

The attached table sets out the information you require. A further recruitment programme is nearly complete.

Planning Inspectors—in post

Date	*Full-time salaried Inspectors*	*Part-time salaried Inspectors*	*Fee-paid Inspectors*
1 January 1997	217	14	201
1 January 1998	224	12	188
1 January 1999	209	45	135

Canals

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps are being taken *(a)* to preserve canals and *(b)* to increase the use of canals for (i) leisure and (ii) commerce. [67916]

Mr. Meale: The Government value the social, economic and environmental benefits that inland waterways can bring and are keen to maximise the full potential of the canal network. We believe the waterways are a substantial asset and have an important role in a number of areas such as leisure and tourism, heritage, amenity, conservation, regeneration and transport.

We have provided financial help to a range of canal restoration projects through the Single Regeneration Budget Challenge Fund, Land Reclamation Programme grant and the Environmental Action Fund. Projects are also eligible for funding from the various Lottery distribution boards, from local authorities and from Europe. The Inland Waterways Amenity Advisory Council's report on their prioritisation of restoration projects will help to ensure that available funding is more effectively targeted.

The Government-sponsored British Tourist Authority (BTA) is actively promoting the waterways of Britain and Ireland. The campaign, involving partnerships with the main waterway industry operators, local authorities and National Tourist Boards, is promoted through most of BTA's overseas offices. BTA's brochure 'Waterways Britain and Ireland' presents waterway travel as an alternative, sustainable way of touring the British Isles.

The day-to-day management and operation of the inland waterway network rests with British Waterways, the Environment Agency, the Broads Authority and a range of other public and private bodies. The three main navigation authorities work closely with BTA, regional and national tourist boards and with the private sector to promote leisure and tourism opportunities on their respective waterways.

The Association of Inland Navigation Authorities, which represents around 30 authorities, is finalising a strategy for the inland navigations of the United Kingdom. This will include objectives for the navigation authorities to meet in relation to developing leisure, tourism and commercial opportunities on the waterways network.

The Inland Waterways Amenity Advisory Council is undertaking a report to demonstrate ways in which the waterways in West Yorkshire can be developed for leisure, tourism and community use.

The Government are keen to encourage the greater use of inland waterways for carrying freight where this is a practical and economic option. We currently give Freight Facilities Grant for inland waterways schemes where freight would otherwise have gone by road. The Department will be re-examining the rules of the scheme to try to encourage more applications for inland waterways.

In addition, the Department is working to update planning guidance on transport which will encourage more freight to be carried by water. Local authorities in their development plans will be expected to consider opportunities for new developments which are served by waterways; and to give better protection to sites and routes, both existing and potential, which could be critical in developing infrastructure to widen transport choices, including water transport.

We intend to publish in the next few months the Transport White Paper daughter document on inland waterways policy, the aim of which will be to raise the profile of the waterways and increase their potential.

Asbestos

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the Government's policy with regard to the banning of the use of asbestos in the United Kingdom. [67986]

Mr. Meale: The Government are firmly committed to finding both a national and a Europe-wide solution to the problem of asbestos, which must be based on sound science. The European Commission's draft proposals for further restrictions on the marketing and use of white asbestos within the EU are likely to be voted on by Member States in March 1999. I expect to receive the Health and Safety Commission's recommendation on a British ban at around the same time, following its recent consultation exercise.

Railtrack (Signal Wiring Safety)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the level of checks carried out by Railtrack on signal wiring. [68057]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Health and Safety Executive have advised me that they are satisfied with Railtrack's strategies for achieving the safety of their signalling systems, including the management of any problems.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the allocation of investment by Railtrack in signal wiring for the next three years; what action the Railway Inspectorate is taking to ascertain the safety of the existing system; and what actions have been undertaken to replace faulty signal wiring this year. [68054]

Ms Glenda Jackson: It is Railtrack's responsibility to ensure the safety of its railway infrastructure and to allocate the resources needed to achieve this. Railtrack's investment plans, including forecast expenditure on signalling, are set out in its Network Management Statement (NMS) which was published last Spring. The new NMS is to be published in March.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) have advised me that they are satisfied with Railtrack's strategies for achieving the safety of their signalling systems, including the management of any problems.

In the light of recent allegations, the Railway Inspectorate has asked Railtrack for an update of its programme for dealing with a specific wiring degradation problem. Railtrack has already assured HSE that the special arrangements in force at relevant locations are adequate to ensure safety and will not prevent the completion of other work necessary for safe operation. HSE intends to inspect sample locations of its choosing to provide independent, external verification that appropriate systems and working methods remain in place to control risks.

The replacement of signal wiring is an operational matter for Railtrack.

Railway Incident, Bow Junction

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will call for a report from the Railway Inspectorate on the recent incident at Bow Junction. [68056]

Ms Glenda Jackson: A serious incident occurred at Bow Junction in East London on 8 October 1994 and was mentioned in paragraph 233 of the Chief Inspecting Officer of Railways' Annual Report on Railway Safety for 1994–96. The cause of a failure of the signalling system was a series of failures in the design, commissioning and testing of intermediate stages of signalling works because of poor communications and lack of project management staff. The project was restarted only after all management and safety procedures had been examined, critically reviewed and rewritten or strengthened as necessary. In February/March 1995, HSE's Railway Inspectorate carried out a thorough audit of these new procedures. The audit team of four, led by a Principal Railway Inspector and including inspectors with railway signalling background, communicated their findings to Railtrack on 1 March 1995. The project has been continually monitored until its substantial completion last year.

Greater London Authority Headquarters

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what advice he received recommending that the final shortlist for consideration as the new headquarters for the Greater London authority should contain three proposals. [67948]

Mr. Raynsford: Of the seven sites considered in detail, two schemes, London Bridge City and Victoria House, stood out. It would not have been right to have put other developers to the trouble and expense of working up their proposals when they had no chance of succeeding.

M6 (Staffordshire)

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the progress made by the Regional Planning Group on alternatives to M6 widening to relieve traffic congestion in Staffordshire. [68322]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My noble Friend the Minister for Roads and Road Safety on 10 December 1998, *Official Report, House of Lords*, column *110*, as well as announcing the Programme of Trunk Road Starts in the West Midlands, took the opportunity to announce the start of the consultation with Regional Planning bodies on the programme of studies to address the most urgent problems on the Trunk Road network not addressed by schemes in the Targeted Programme of Improvements.

The West Midlands to North West Conurbation Study is scheduled to begin in the Summer of 1999. Consultation with the Regional Planning Conference will take place during the preparation of the consultants brief and at regular time throughout the life of the study.

As part of this multi-modal study, the consultants will be asked to indicate a comprehensive range of strategies that could be used to tackle the traffic problems of the area, including the possibility of modal shift especially for freight. All infrastructure improvements that are identified as a preferred option, whether road or other modes, will be assessed against the New Approach to Appraisal.

Packaging Waste Regulations

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to announce changes to the Packaging Waste Regulations. [68247]

Mr. Meale: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment on Thursday 28 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns *335–37*.

Social Services (SSAs)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list *(a)* by social services authority and *(b)* in total (i) the standard spending assessment for personal social services in 1998–99, (ii) the standard spending assessment for personal social services in 1999–2000, (iii) the difference between (i) and (ii), (iv) the difference expressed as a percentage, (v) the special transitional grant for 1998–99, (vi) the difference between standard spending assessment for personal social services in 1999–2000 and the standard spending assessment for personal social services in 1998–99 combined totalled with special transitional grant for 1998–99 and (vii) the difference in (vi) expressed as a percentage. [68367]

Ms Armstrong: The figures requested have been placed, in the form requested, in the Library of the House. The comparison which they provide is, however, misleading. This is because they do not reflect the Comprehensive Spending Review's full provision for personal social services, which started from a zero base, looking at expenditure needs afresh. The only fair comparison is to look at total resources provided for social services which, in aggregate, show a 6.1 per cent. cash increase or a 3.5 per cent. real terms increase between 1998–99 and 1999–2000. The increased resources we are making available will meet the costs of looking after existing and new community care clients, and enable local authorities to deliver real improvements in services.

Employees at Risk

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the opportunities available under current legislation to take steps to reduce the risk of violence to employees whose job brings them into face to face contact with the public. [68372]

Mr. Meale: I have looked carefully at this issue. There has been a lot of good work done by the Health and Safety Commission and Executive. However, I want to examine what other measures are available. I have therefore written to the Health and Safety Commission to ask for advice on options for further action that will have a positive impact on preventing work-related violence.

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to require the Health and Safety Executive to advise employers about measures that can be taken to reduce the risk to employees of violence at work. [68373]

Mr. Meale: None at present. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has already issued general guidance and sector specific guidance for the retail and finance sectors. The Health and Safety Commission (HSC) has also issued sector specific guidance for the health care and education sectors. Health and Safety Inspectors also offer advice in the course of their normal contact with employers and employees.

Once I have received advice from the HSC, I will be able to consider what further action is necessary.

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with *(a)* trade unions and *(b)* employers about violence at work; and if he will make a statement. [68374]

Mr. Meale: When I replied to a Private Member's Debate on health and safety proposed by my hon. Friend on 4 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns 804–06, I stressed that this Government would not tolerate violence and aggression towards working people. I have continued to promote that message whenever I can, especially during the meetings I have with trade unions and employers. I also continue to draw attention to the issue in the many speeches I make about health and safety. Recent occasions when I have done so were speeches I made at the National Health and Safety Groups Council on 28 January and the AEEU National Academy of Safety and Health on 14 September 1998.

In addition, both trade unions and employers participate in the Interdepartmental Committee on Violence to Staff (ICVS) which is chaired by the Health and Safety Executive.

Road Closures

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on how many occasions in each of the last 10 years for which figures are available were the *(a)* A62, *(b)* M62, *(c)* A66 and *(d)* A69 closed due to inclement weather. [68168]

Ms Glenda Jackson: From the records that are available, the numbers of closures are as follows:

A62

The A62 is a local road except for a short length linking with junction 27 of the M62. The highway authorities for the high level sections of the road are Kirklees Metropolitan District Council and Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council.

The reports that we have obtained are from Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council and cover the last three years only. During that time in the year April to April 1996–97, the road was closed for a total of four days and in 1997–98 for a total of half a day.

M62

The motorway was closed overnight between junctions 21 and 22 on 25 January 1995. This was necessary when a lorry jack-knifed in heavy early evening snow, blocking the carriageway and preventing further gritting.

The motorway was also closed between junctions 20 and 22 on 12 and 13 January 1993 when lighting columns become unstable in high winds.

A66

Records are available for the last 6 years only:

	Full closure		*Partial closure (HGVs and caravans)*	
Year	*Number of times*	*Reason*	*Number of times*	*Reason*
1999 (to date)	—	—	3	High wind
1998	3	Snow/ice	19	High wind
1997	1	Snow/ice	16	High wind
1996	13	Snow/ice	26	High wind
1995	6	Snow/ice	18	High wind
1994	4	Snow/ice	No records available	
1993	4	Snow/ice	No records available	

A69

Records are available for the last six years only:

The road has not been closed due to inclement weather.

N-Viro

Dr. Michael Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to ensure that the N-Viro product from Great Stambridge is subject to the Sludge (Use in Agriculture) Regulations 1989 and the 1996 Code of Practice for agricultural use of sewage sludge. [68370]

Mr. Meale: All sewage sludge used on agricultural land, including that treated by the N-Viro process is subject to the Sludge (Use in Agriculture) Regulations 1989 and the associated Code of Practice. The regulations are enforced in England and Wales by the Environment Agency.

Dr. Michael Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the appraisal by the Environment Agency into the Waste Management Licence application by Anglian Water for the N-Viro process at Great Stambridge will be completed and issued. [68371]

Mr. Meale: The Environment Agency expects to complete the appraisal of the application by Anglian Water for a Waste Management Licence for the N-Viro process at Great Stambridge by early summer. An interim report will be produced by the Environment Agency in February and processing of sludge from Southend will not begin until the Waste Management Licence has been granted.

Barking to Gospel Oak Railway

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps are being taken by his Department to promote improved services on the Barking to Gospel Oak railway line. [68342]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Silverlink operate this line under a franchise agreement with the Franchising Director. This includes a contractual obligation to replace the existing slam door rolling stock with sliding door rolling stock by May 1999. It also includes contractual commitments to upgrade the passenger information systems at stations along the route. Railtrack have reinstated a signal between two of the stations on the line: this has increased the capacity of the track and should reduce delays caused by conflicts with other operators using the line.

Leisure Complex (Crosby)

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the progress of the PFI bid submitted by Sefton Metropolitan Authority to build a new swimming and leisure complex in Crosby. [66765]

Mr. Raynsford: The Metropolitan Borough of Sefton was told on 27 August 1998 of the inter-departmental Project Review Group's decision to agree to my Department's recommendation that their project be included in the updated list of local authority PFI projects the Government intend to support. That list was the subject of a press release the same day. It is now for the local authority to bring the project to contract signature.

Taxi Accessibility

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to produce further proposals for taxi accessibility; what discussions he has held with *(a)* vehicle manufacturers and *(b)* suppliers to ensure the availability of vehicles which conform with taxi accessibility regulations; and if he will make a statement. [68641]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We have held extensive consultation on our proposals for taxi accessibility under the provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 with manufacturers, operators, local authorities and with organisations representing disabled people.

We are reviewing our proposals in the light of this consultation and we will be publishing a further round of consultation, including draft regulations and a regulatory impact assessment, later this year.

My Department is also in close and regular touch with vehicle manufacturers and converters and we believe that a range of vehicles which meet the regulations will become available to address the new market which will be created.

Signal Equipment Safety

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the safety of signal equipment owned by Railtrack. [68466]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The proper design, installation and maintenance of the signalling system is paramount to railway safety. The responsibility for the railway infrastructure lies with Railtrack. The Health and Safety Executive have advised me that they are satisfied with Railtrack's strategies for achieving the safety of their signalling systems including the management of any problems.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what safety guidelines his Department issues in relation to the maintenance and renewal of signal equipment on railway lines. [68467]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The responsibility for the safe maintenance and renewal of signalling equipment lies with Railtrack, who issue safety guidelines in these matters. The Health and Safety Executive's Railway Inspectorate undertakes routine monitoring of the way Railtrack discharges its responsibilities for the safe operation of the railway network and would take appropriate enforcement action if necessary.

West Coast Line

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with the Rail Regulator concerning the cleanliness of trains on the West Coast Line; and if he will make a statement. [68001]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The cleanliness of trains if a matter for the Franchising Director rather than the Rail Regulator. Virgin is required under its franchise agreement to carry out regular customer satisfaction surveys. These measure satisfaction with, among other things, cleanliness of the trains. The latest available published figures (for the period to July 1998) show that the cleanliness level on Virgin Trains was at or above the agreed benchmarks.

Virgin Trains

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with Virgin Trains on the discounting of void days from punctuality and reliability tables; and if he will make a statement. [68000]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Train operators are entitled to declare days void where they have been unable to run an effective service for the day. For every void day, the operator has to offer one day extension or refund on season tickets. The number of days voided by each train operator will be included in the Franchising Director's next and future quarterly Performance Bulletins. OPRAF are considering how the statistics in the Bulletin can be made to reflect more accurately the experience of passengers.

Concessionary Bus Fare Schemes

Mr. Lepper: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the local authority areas in which no concessionary bus fare scheme for pensioners is in operation. [68590]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My information is that there are 10 local authorities that have no concessionary fare scheme for their resident pensioners. These are the District Councils for Caradon, Eden, Hambleton, Kennet, Kerrier, Malvern Hills, North Cornwall, Penwith, Scarborough and South Holland.

Waste Incinerators

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many incinerators used for disposing of public waste materials in the UK *(a)* are currently operational and *(b)* were operational five years ago. [68133]

Mr. Meale: In England and Wales, ten municipal waste incinerators are currently operational. Twenty three such incinerators were operational in 1994.

Gas Vehicle Manufacturers (Tax Incentives)

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what tax incentives are available to manufacturers of motor vehicles powered by road fuel gases. [68163]

Ms Glenda Jackson: There are no specific tax incentives available for manufacturers of motor vehicles powered by road fuel gases. Government action to support the wider uptake of these fuels focuses principally on assisting with the purchase and operation of gas powered vehicles. Duty on road fuel gases has been frozen for the last two Budgets, and the Government are committed to at least maintaining the 1997 duty differential between road fuel gases and ordinary diesel. My Department is also funding the Powershift programme which provides grants to help cover the additional cost of purchasing gas powered vehicles. These measures should provide some certainty to the road fuel gas market, and help to encourage manufacturers to invest in the production in gas powered vehicles.

Waste Recycling

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will list *(a)* the recycling targets and *(b)* the level of achievement of these targets currently being achieved by the Brighton and Hove Unitary Authority, for (i) glass (clear and green), (ii) plastics, (iii) aluminium cans, (iv) steel cans and (v) paper and cardboard; [68138]

(2) if he will list *(a)* the recycling targets for domestic and commercial waste and *(b)* the level of achievement of these targets by each of the unitary authorities in England (i) currently and (ii) five years ago; [68137]

(3) if he will list the recycling targets for (i) domestic and (ii) commercial waste achieved by *(a)* each of the district and borough council authorities in East and West Sussex and *(b)* the Brighton and Hove Unitary Authority; and if he will list the comparable figures for 1994. [68165]

Mr. Meale: When the previous Government published their White Paper "Making Waste Work" in 1995, they set a number of indicative targets for waste. One of the primary targets was to increase recycling and recovery so that they dealt with 40 per cent. of municipal waste by 2005. There was also a subsidiary target to recycle or compost 25 per cent. of household waste by 2000. These indicative targets were set for the whole of England and Wales and it is up to each individual local authority to determine their own priorities in the light of these targets.

The latest figures for municipal waste relate to 1996–97—the first year after publication of "Making Waste Work". Recycling and energy recovery of municipal waste stood at around 13 per cent., with recycling running at around 7 per cent. of household waste. No comparable figures are available for five years ago.

The Department is not able to release details of the recycling rate of an individual authority, or for individual materials within this rate, because the figures that are supplied to it for the Department's Municipal Waste Survey are done so on a confidential basis.

The Government are currently preparing a new waste strategy. The consultation paper "Less Waste: More Value" confirmed their support for the targets in "Making Waste Work", but considers that there is a need for a substantial increase in recycling and recovery, going beyond the targets set by the previous Government.

We believe that, for targets to be effective in changing behaviour towards a desired end, they have to be challenging but achievable, underpinned by a clear course of action, and capable of proper measurement and public explanation. Targets also need to be justified against the principles of good regulation: accountability, transparency, targeting, consistency, and proportionality.

Public Waste Incinerators

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what are the current official guidelines on the building of public waste incinerators near densely populated areas. [68136]

Mr. Raynsford: The building of public waste incinerators will normally require the grant of planning permission under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended) and an authorisation under the Environmental Protection Act 1990. Government guidance on the location of incinerators is included in Planning Policy Guidance note 23 "Planning and Pollution Control". This will be updated soon when Planning Policy Guidance note 10 "Planning and Waste Management" is published. The Department also issued a guidance note to local authorities in August 1997, on the provision of incinerators in connection with the slaughter of cattle under the "Over Thirty Months Scheme".

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many public waste incinerators have been constructed in the UK in each of the last five years. [68134]

Mr. Meale: Within England and Wales, one municipal waste incinerator was constructed in 1997. All other plants currently operating in England and Wales were significantly upgraded during the period in question, but no other plants were newly constructed during this period.

Waste Disposal

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of public waste is currently processed through *(a)* recycling, *(b)* landfill and *(c)* incineration. [68135]

Mr. Meale: The table gives the percentage of municipal waste, collected by local authorities in England and Wales in 1996–97, which was treated or disposed of by different methods.

Treatment and disposal of municipal waste, England and Wales, 1996–97

	Percentage
Recycling	7
Landfill	84
Incineration without energy recovery	3
Incineration with energy recovery	6

Source:
DETR/WO Municipal Waste Survey, 1996–97

Heavy Goods Vehicles

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many HGVs have converted to road fuel gases since May 1997. [68164]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The number of HGVs able to run on road fuel gases increased from 41 vehicles in the first quarter of 1997 to 96 vehicles in the third quarter of 1998, according to the latest statistics from the DVLA vehicle register. While this increase is small, the Government expect that there will be strong growth in the number of HGVs converting to road fuel gases, particularly for those vehicles predominantly operating in urban areas.

Buses (Road Fuel Gases)

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many public transport buses have converted to road fuel gases since May 1997. [68162]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The number of public service buses able to run on road fuel gases increased from 20 vehicles in the first quarter of 1997 to 53 vehicles in the third quarter of 1998, according to the latest statistics from the DVLA vehicle register. While this increase is small, the Government expect that there will be strong growth in the number of buses converting to road fuel gases, particularly for those vehicles predominantly operating in urban areas.

Local Authorities (Status Criteria)

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the criteria which apply to *(a)* districts seeking to attain borough status and *(b)* boroughs seeking to attain city status; and if he will make a statement. [66804]

Mr. Raynsford: A district council may petition Her Majesty The Queen for the grant of a charter conferring upon the district the status of borough. The resolution authorising the petition requires a two-thirds majority of the members at a meeting specially convened for that purpose. The title of city is an honour conferred by Her Majesty The Queen, by Letters Patent; it is not a right which can be claimed by the fulfilment of specific conditions.

Merchant Vessels

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many merchant vessels are registered under a British flag; and how many were so registered in May 1997. [68613]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The numbers of trading vessels registered at the end of the quarters nearest to May 1997 and at 30 September 1998, the latest available, are:

Register	*31 March 1997*	*30 June 1997*	*30 September 1998*
United Kingdom	377	380	375
Isle of Man	130	139	158
Channel Islands	3	3	3

Jubilee Line

Mr. Syms: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the contingency plans in the event of the Jubilee Line extension not being completed in time for the Millennium Exhibition. [66796]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government have welcomed London Transport's phased opening strategy of the Jubilee Line Extension project and their confirmation that it will open in good time for the Millennium Experience. It would, however, be irresponsible not to have in place contingency arrangements to manage problems on any of the main transport links to the Millennium site over the Millennium Year, including any failure of the Jubilee Line. I therefore asked London Underground Ltd., through my Millennium Access Co-ordination Group, to lead the production of contingency plans for this and other eventualities.

London Underground have, in association with London's other transport operators, developed plans to cover a wide-range of possible scenarios and identified an underlying command and control strategy to direct the plans should they need to be invoked. An overview of the plans has recently been presented to my group, and we will be examining the detailed proposals shortly.

The next phase will be to test and validate the plans, and to implement the control measures so that they are in a

'state of readiness for implementation'

by the Autumn.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will announce the outcome of consultation on the local government finance settlement for 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [68858]

Mr. Prescott: I have today laid before the House the Local Government Finance Report (England) 1999–2000 and the Special Grant Report (No. 37). These reports establish the amounts of revenue support grant (RSG) and non-domestic rates (NDR) to be paid to local authorities in 1999–2000, and the basis of their distribution; and provide for Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) Reduction Grant and Central Support Protection Grant to be paid to certain authorities for 1999–2000. Drafts of these reports were issued for consultation on 2 December 1998. The Department received written representations from the Local Government Association and the Association of London Government, as well as from 215 individual local authorities and six local authority groups. My Ministerial colleagues at DETR also met the Associations, 72 delegations from local councils and four from local authority groups.

My proposals included changes to grant distribution to give a fairer system. Having considered the views of the local authority associations and others who have commented on my initial proposals, I have decided to make only the changes in the SSA methodology which formed the basis of consultation, and no others. The SSAs for individual authorities may be slightly different from those at consultation, generally reflecting more accurate data that have become available since then.

However, changes in the method of distribution mean that some authorities do much less well than others. The change to the formula for children's social services, in particular, has had a serious impact on some authorities. Following representations, I have concluded that I should make some changes to my proposals for a Central Support Protection Grant. This will ensure that authorities with education responsibilities can continue to provide services while they adjust their spending plans. I shall therefore provide an extra £30 million in Central Support Protection Grant to ensure that all authorities with education and social services responsibilities receive at least 1.5 per cent. more grant in 1999–2000 than they did in 1998–99. I can also confirm that no local authority will receive less grant in 1999–2000 than they did in 1998–99.

I also received representations from local government on council tax benefit subsidy limitation. I have considered these carefully but decided to make no change to the scheme I proposed on 2 December.

This year's local government finance settlement is the most generous since the introduction of the council tax. We have made grant distribution fairer. No authority will lose grant next year. Many will benefit from substantially increased resources, reflecting a 5.5 per cent. overall increase in funding.

For the longer term, we have published SSA totals for the next three years, and do not expect to make further changes in the method of distribution. Authorities therefore have a firm basis for planning long term, sustained service improvements.

There is no excuse on the basis of this settlement for councils to inflict steep council tax rises on their local communities. Our increased funding for local government is generous, but affordable. We look to councils to strike the same balance.

Last year we produced, for the first time, a Plain English guide to local government finance. This was widely welcomed, and I have arranged for an updated edition to be produced.

I shall be sending copies of these reports and the Plain English guide to all authorities, together with tables showing each authority's Standard Spending Assessment and its entitlement to RSG, NDR and special grant. Copies of the reports, tables, and the guide are available in the Vote Office and the Library.

Aer Lingus Crash

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what *(a)* summaries and *(b)* microfiche records of the report of the Air Accidents Investigation Branch into the Aer Lingus Viscount crash of 24 March 1968 have been retained. [68834]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The investigation into the accident that occurred to the Aer Lingus Viscount aircraft on 24 March 1968 was conducted by Air Accident Investigation officials of the Irish Department of Transport and Power. The AAIB participated in the investigation. The Irish report was published in September 1970.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Parliamentary Calendar

45. **Mr. Bradshaw:** To ask the President of the Council what proposals she has to introduce reform to the parliamentary year. [66807]

Mr. Tipping: I would like to see how the experiment on Thursday sittings agreed by the House on 16 December works before making further proposals.

Standing Committee on Regional Affairs

46. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the President of the Council if she will make a statement on her proposals for the reactivation of the Standing Committee on Regional Affairs. [66808]

Mrs. Beckett: I announced on 14 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns 446–47, that a proposal would be put to the Modernisation Committee to revive and adapt the standing committee on regional affairs. A memorandum setting out the proposal will shortly be sent to the Committee and I hope they will report on it in the near future.

European Political Institutions (Travel and Communications)

47. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the President of the Council when she plans to announce amended arrangements for travel to, and communications with, European political institutions. [66809]

Mr. Tipping: My right hon. Friend the President of the Council has said before that the scheme to allow Members to visit EU institutions would be extended. I can announce today that, from the next financial year, Members will be able to claim re-imbursement of travel and subsistence expenses for one visit either to the main EU institutions or to the national Parliament of any EU Member state. The Scheme will be reviewed after a year to see if it is possible to allow two visits in the second year.

Parliamentary Questions

49. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the President of the Council what plans she has to introduce a question period for questions without notice. [66811]

Mrs. Beckett: I take questions without notice every Thursday after announcing the business. The Prime Minister also takes questions without notice every Wednesday. I have no plans to extend this procedure.

Iraq

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the President of the Council if she will establish an ad hoc Select Committee on military action against Iraq. [66810]

Mrs. Beckett: I have no plans to do so.

Parliamentary Procedures Reform

Mr. Dismore: To ask the President of the Council what representations she has received concerning the procedure for putting non-contentious, technical law reform Bills recommended by the Law Commission before Parliament; and if she will make a statement. [67302]

Mrs. Beckett: I have recently met the Chairman of the Law Commission to discuss this matter. There already exists an expedited procedure for Law Commission bills. This issue may also be considered by the Modernisation Committee in the course of its current inquiry into a second forum or main committee.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the President of the Council what plans she has to propose reforms of parliamentary procedure in respect of uncontroversial Bills implementing Law Commission recommendations. [67301]

Mrs. Beckett: Standing Order No. 59 already provides for the second reading of Law Commission bills to be taken in second reading committee rather than on the floor of the House. I have no immediate plans to propose other reforms of this procedure, but it may be relevant to the Modernisation Committee's current inquiry into the possibility of establishing a second forum or main committee.

Law Commission Recommendations (Bills)

Mr. Dismore: To ask the President of the Council how many Bills based on Law Commission recommendations have been enacted in each of the last five years. [67304]

Mrs. Beckett: The figures are set out in the table. The total of 20 includes two Statute Law Revision Acts and two Consolidation Acts with amendments giving effect to Law Commission recommendations.

Year	*Number*
1994	3
1995	7
1996	8
1997	1
1998	2

Mr. Dismore: To ask the President of the Council what was the length of time of the debates which took place at each parliamentary stage of each of the Bills introduced to implement Law Commission recommendations in each of the last five years. [67303]

Mrs. Beckett: The figures in the table relate to the total amount of debating time on the floor of the House of Commons and do not include any committee proceedings. Law Commission proposals formed only part of some of the bills. Bills taken through all their stages without debate are recorded as having taken less than one minute.

	Debating time
Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994	54 hours 54 minutes
Sale and Supply of Goods Act 1994	1 hour 44 minutes
Law of Property (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1994	2 minutes
Finance Act 1995	36 hours 46 minutes
Sale of Goods (Amendment) Act 1995	Less than 1 minute
Landlord and Tenant (Covenants) Act 1995	33 minutes
Civil Evidence Act 1995	3 minutes
Law Reform (Succession) Act 1995	1 minute
Private International Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1995	1 minute
Statute Law (Repeals) Act 1995	1 hour 12 minutes
Law Reform (Year and a Day Rule) Act 1996	Less than 1 minute
Family Law Act 1996	19 hours 8 minutes
Trusts of Land and Appointment of Trustees Act 1996	Less than 1 minute
Damages Act 1996	3 minutes
Housing Act 1996	25 hours 24 minutes
Education Act 1996 (consolidation Act)	Less than 1 minute
Schools Inspection Act 1996 (consolidation Act)	Less than 1 minute
Theft (Amendment) Act 1996	Less than 1 minute
land Registration Act 1997	Less than 1 minute
Late Payment of Commercial Debts (Interest) Act 1998	4 hours 8 minutes
Statute Law (Repeals) Act 1998	Less than 1 minute

Salary Payments (Euros)

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the President of the Council what plans she has to meet requests from right hon. and hon. Members for the payment of their salaries in euros. [67273]

Mr. Pearson: To ask the President of the Council if she will make arrangements for right hon. and hon. Members to have the option of receiving their salaries in euros. [66509]

Mrs. Beckett: There are no plans to offer right hon. and hon. Members the option of receiving their salaries in euros while the United Kingdom is outside the single currency zone.

Lords Amendments

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the President of the Council how many amendments to legislation made in the House of Lords were *(a)* approved and *(b)* rejected by this House in the 1997–98 session; and how many of each were Government amendments. [67607]

Mrs. Beckett: In the 1997–98 session, the House of Commons considered 1,685 amendments made by the House of Lords to bills originating in this House. This House agreed to 1,615 of these amendments (four with amendments of its own) and disagreed to 70. To give precise statistics as to how many of each were Government amendments would incur a disproportionate cost. However, the House of Lords Public Bill Sessional Statistics for Session 1997–98 is a document which is in the public domain. This contains information concerning Government defeats in the House of Lords, stating in each case whether these were subsequently reversed by the House of Commons.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Immigration Appeals

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department how many persons appointed to chair immigration appeal tribunals have left office before the end of their respective terms during the period of office of the present president of the immigration appeal tribunal; and how many of them are *(a)* women and *(b)* members of ethnic minorities. [68482]

Mr. Hoon: No person appointed to chair Immigration Appeal Tribunals has left office before the end of their appointment during the period of the present President of the Immigration Appeal Tribunal, His Honour Judge David Pearl.

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what are the duties of the Vice-President of Administration of the Immigration Appeals Authority; when the present appointment was made and at what salary; how many *(a)* informal and *(b)* formal complaints about the vice-president have been made since his appointment; and what was the outcome of the complaints. [68487]

Mr. Hoon: The post of Vice President of Administration of the Immigration Appellate Authority does not exist. The Immigration Appellate Authority consists of Immigration Adjudicators and the Immigration Appeal Tribunal. The Compliment of the Adjudicators consists of; one Chief Adjudicator; one Deputy Chief Adjudicator; 4 Regional Adjudicators; 29 full-time Adjudicators; and 213 part-time Adjudicators. The compliment of the Immigration Appeal Tribunal consists of one President; 4 Vice Presidents; 25 part-time legal members; and 26 part-time lay members. On the matter of complaints I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave on 1 February 1999.

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department how many *(a)* informal and *(b)* formal complaints have been made to his Department about the activities and attitudes of immigration appeal adjudicators by other adjudicators in each of the last five years; how many were from *(a)* women and *(b)* people from ethnic minorities; and what was the outcome of each complaint. [68486]

Mr. Hoon: No such complaints are recorded as having been made to the Lord Chancellor's Department between 1994 and 1996.

In 1997 there were three informal complaints. Two of them were from a female member of a minority ethnic community. One of these complaints was resolved by agreement between the parties and the other was superseded by further discussions and correspondence. The third complaint was discussed with the individual concerned and no further action taken.

In 1998 there were four informal and two formal complaints, all from a female member of a minority ethnic community. The complainant requested that the matters of substance raised in the informal and one of the formal complaints should be recorded but did not seek further action. The Lord Chancellor determined in relation to the other formal complaint that the adjudicator concerned should have made more careful enquiries in handling of complaint from solicitors and not have referred to the "promulgation" of a determination.

The Lord Chancellor is considering one informal complaint made this year by a female member of a minority ethnic community.

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department on what date the post of research and policy adjudicator at the Immigration Appeals Authority was created; how the person chosen was selected and by whom; and what steps were taken to ensure that the method of appointment was free from race and gender prejudice. [68485]

Mr. Hoon: Following an announcement in Parliament on 18 December 1996, *Official Report*, column 752, that the then Government intended to review Asylum and Immigration Appeals, the Regional Immigration Adjudicators asked one of their number, Dr. H. H. Storey, to prepare a paper which could be submitted to the Lord Chancellor's Department, setting out the Authority's response to that Review. Dr. Storey prepared the paper and it was submitted to the Lord Chancellor's Department in May 1997. From that date Dr. Storey has, with the endorsement of the present and previous Chief Adjudicator, continued to work on research projects for the Authority, in addition to his normal duties. Dr. Storey was originally chosen because the Regional Adjudicators considered him to be the person best qualified for the position. He is a former University Lecturer and an expert on European and Human Rights law.

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department when the European panel of the Immigration Appeals Authority was established; for what purpose and by whom; how and by whom its membership was recommended and appointed; and what steps were taken to ensure that the method of appointment was free of race and gender prejudice. [68484]

Mr. Hoon: A European Panel was established in 1997 by the Chief Immigration Adjudicator as a result of specific concerns expressed by practitioners that it occasionally happened that cases with complex European issues were listed before relatively inexperienced Adjudicators. The intention was to create a core of Adjudicators who could be trained in European law, and that this core be widened as quickly as possible. The first group of Adjudicators were nominated by Regional Adjudicators. All full-time Adjudicators in post as at November 1998 have now been trained and are on the Panel.

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department if it is mandatory for the Chief Adjudicator of the Immigration Appeal Authority to report the nature and number of complaints of race or gender prejudice or discrimination by members of the authority about other members to his Department. [68483]

Mr. Hoon: The Chief Immigration Adjudicator is responsible, in liaison with the Lord Chancellor, his officials and the Court Service, for the efficient operation of the Adjudicators' system. The Lord Chancellor would expect the Chief Immigration Adjudicator, and all other Tribunal Presidents or Tribunal Heads, to inform him of any complaint against a member of the judiciary, whether it is from a member of the public or a fellow member of the judiciary.

Judiciary (Race and Gender Discrimination)

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what is the standard of proof used to determine complaints of race or gender discrimination or prejudice against members of the judiciary by other members of the judiciary who are women or from a minority ethnic background. [68488]

Mr. Hoon: Having regard to the gravity of the allegation the Lord Chancellor requires clear and convincing proof before he would be satisfied that the complaint was made out.

Barristers' Services

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the sets of barristers' chambers in London who have rendered services for his Department since 1 May 1997 and the remuneration made in respect of such services in each case. [68623]

Mr. Hoon: The remuneration received by sets of barristers' chambers in London which have rendered services to the Lord Chancellor's Department over this period is set out in the table. This includes work done for the Court Service Agency and work by the Treasury Junior.

London Chambers	*Total paid (£)*
Blackstone Chambers, Blackstone House, (formerly 2 Hare Court)	13,491
4 Breams Buildings	6,373
1 Brick Court	3,995
1 Crown Office Row, Ground Floor	5,551
Devereux Chambers, Devereux Court	1,486
5 Essex Court	164
39 Essex Street	20,180

London Chambers	Total paid (£)
Falcon Chambers	2,361
4–5 Gray's Inn Square	3,624
1 Hare Court	3,348
Keating Chambers, 10 Essex Street	1,586
1 King's Bench Walk	3,965
6 King's Bench Walk	7,832
11 King's Bench Walk, Ground Floor	36,687
11 King's Bench Walk, 1st Floor	1,645
Monckton Chambers, 4 Raymond Buildings	1,879
13 Old Square, 1st Floor	2,393
3 Pump Court, Upper Ground Floor	2,173
6 Pump Court, Ground and Lower Ground Floor	2,350
Queen Elizabeth Building	23,735
3 Raymond Buildings	1,092
3 Serjeants' Inn	840
7 Stone Buildings, Ground Floor	1,175
1 Temple Gardens	31,531

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Carers (Further and Higher Education)

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what policies the Government are implementing to encourage carers to enter further and higher education. [67971]

Mr. Mudie: We are committed to widening participation in both further and higher education and our plans will enable many people, including carers, to pursue their studies. We are promoting flexible learning opportunities through our new initiatives such as the University for Industry and other possibilities for distance learning. Our enhanced student support arrangements for FE and HE will also promote access to learning; and the introduction of Individual Learning Accounts will give people the flexibility to decide what, how and when to learn, and empower them to take greater control of their own career and personal development needs.

Education (Portsmouth)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the increase in standard spending assessment for education for Portsmouth Education Authority for 1999–2000. [67241]

Ms Estelle Morris: The provisional education SSA for Portsmouth in 1999–2000 represents an underlying increase of £4.1 million or 6 per cent. These figures illustrate the effect of allowing for local authority changes of function and taking account of new arrangements for funding music and student support.

Teachers (PE)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many students enrolled for PE teacher training (secondary) in each year since 1980. [67740]

Ms Estelle Morris: The following table shows the number of new entrants to physical education (PE) initial teacher training for the years 1982–83 to 1998–99. Information for 1980–81 and 1981–82 is not available.

Recruitment to physical education initial teacher training courses[1], England, 1982–83 to 1998–99

Year	Intake
1982–83[2]	866
1983–84[2]	745
1984–85[2]	711
1985–86[2]	700
1986–87[2]	738
1987–88[2]	848
1988–89[2]	863
1989–90[2]	964
1990–91[2]	898
1991–92[2]	1,078
1992–93[3]	1,153
1993–94[3]	1,084
1994–95[3]	1,309
1995–96[3]	1,311
1996–97[3]	1,384
1997–98[3]	1,644
1998–99[3,4]	1,491

[1] Includes School Centred ITT and Open University
[2] Between 1982–83 and 1991–92 all figures represent full-time equivalents
[3] From 1992–93 to 1998–99 figures represent head-counts; that is the total of full-time and part-time recruitment
[4] Provisional
Sources:
1982–83 to 1993–94: DFE Annual Recruitment Survey
1994–95: Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE) Early Statistics Survey
1995–96 to 1998–99: TTA Survey of ITT Providers

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what funding there is for in-service education for physical education. [67739]

Mr. Charles Clarke: This information is not collected or held centrally.

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 15 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *482*, how many hours of training are given to primary teachers to deliver the whole physical education curriculum. [67858]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We do not specify the amount of training to be given for any subject. It is for individual providers of primary initial teacher training to ensure that their courses enable trainees to meet the standards for the award of Qualified Teacher Status.

Early Education (3-year-olds)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) of 14 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *261*, what is the participation rate of 3-year-olds in early education in England. [67853]

Ms Hodge: The information is not available in the form requested. There were 222,000 or 35 per cent. of three-year-olds maintained nursery and primary schools in England in January 1998; this figure rises to 251,000 or 40 per cent. of three-year-olds if special and independent schools are included. In addition, the Government have set a target to double the national participation rate of three-year-olds in free early education places to 66 per cent. by 2002, using the maintained, voluntary and private sectors.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) of 14 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *261*, what is the participation rate of 3-year-olds in early education in Southampton. [67857]

Ms Hodge: The information is not available in the form requested. There were 406 3-year-olds in maintained nursery and primary schools in the Southampton Local Education Authority in January 1998. In addition, the Government have set a target to double the national participation rate of 3-year-olds in free early education places to 66 per cent. by 2002, using the maintained, voluntary and private sectors.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the additional factors relating to young children used by his Department in determining the 50 local education authority areas which have been given preference in distributing funding for early education places for 3-year-olds. [68524]

Ms Hodge: The 50 Local Education Authorities which will receive Funding in 1999–2000 for early education places for 3-year-olds are those with the highest levels of social need measured by the Government's Index of Local Deprivation (ILD) augmented by two factors: low birth weight and the proportion of births to teenage mothers.

The indicators that were used to draw up the ILD are:

housing lacking amenities;
over-crowded housing;
17-year-olds no longer in full-time education;
derelict land;
income support;
dependent children of income support recipients;
low educational attainment (percentage of children gaining GCSE passes at grades D-G only plus those not gaining any GCSE passes);
long term unemployment;
unemployment;
insurance premiums;
non income support recipients in receipt of council tax benefit;
standard mortality ratios.

Education Standard Spending Assessment

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much weighting is given to pupil numbers in calculating the education SSA. [67653]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* Some 81 per cent. of the education SSA related to schools is allocated on the basis of pupil numbers.

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the possibility of the local authority funding regulations enabling a local education authority to receive funding based on the SSA for education where there are no maintained schools. [67655]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 21 January 1999]:* The Government have no plans to change the current education SSA system under which most of the national total is allocated on the basis of the number of registered pupils educated at maintained schools.

Autism

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what steps he is taking to ensure that current school-aged children with autism have suitable provision made for them; and if he will make a statement; [68201]

(2) what steps he is taking to ensure that every local education authority will make available for each registered pupil with special educational needs, with particular reference to autistic spectrum disorder, the special educational provision which that learning difficulty calls for; and if he will make a statement; [68202]

(3) what steps he is taking to ensure that every local education authority places the most important component of an autistic child's education on the statement of special educational needs of each child it has identified as having autism; and if he will make a statement; [68203]

(4) what steps he is taking to ensure that every local education authority has a range of provision for children with autism that includes specialist provision; and if he will make a statement; [68204]

(5) what steps he is taking to ensure that every local education authority ensures that sufficient schemes are available to provide the opportunity of appropriate education for all pupils with autistic spectrum disorder in their area; and if he will make a statement; [68205]

(6) if he has obtained from each local education authority a copy of the guidance which they make available to the public on the educational services for children with autistic spectrum disorder; and if he will make a statement; [68206]

(7) what steps he is taking to ensure that the guidance on educational services for children with autistic spectrum disorder, available to the public from local education authorities, is fair and consistent throughout England and Wales; and if he will make a statement. [68207]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Schools and local education authorities are under a duty to identify children with special educational needs, including those with autistic spectrum disorders, and to arrange provision which meets the needs of individual children. Statements of special educational need set out the range of difficulties and the special provision to be made for the education of children with the most severe and complex needs, including a proportion of the children whose needs arise from autistic spectrum disorders. When arranging provision, after consultation with parents, local education authorities are able to place children with autism in mainstream schools, SEN units in mainstream schools, special schools or specialist autism schools, either in the maintained, voluntary or independent sectors. The Department is funding five regional pilots which will be looking at arrangements for the co-ordination of SEN provision and services. It is expected that some of the projects will focus on provision for pupils with autism. The Department aims to extend regional co-operation arrangements to all areas from April 2000.

Under the Education (School Information) (England) Regulations 1998 local education authorities are required to publish annually information about the arrangements they make for children with special educational needs, including those with autistic spectrum disorders.

Authorities may, if they wish, publish specific guidance on the arrangements they make for children with autistic spectrum disorders. Any such guidance must be consistent with authorities' duties under the law and have regard to the SEN *Code of Practice*.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what grants have been made by his Department to Shropshire County Council in addition to revenue support grant in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99; [68439]

(2) what grants have been made by his Department to Telford and Wrekin Council in 1998–99. [68440]

Ms Estelle Morris: Details of the grants, in addition to revenue support grant, made available by the Department for Education and Employment to Shropshire County Council in 1997–98 and 1998–99, and to Telford and Wrekin Council in 1998–99 are shown in the tables. For the Standards Fund the figures shown include the grant made by the Department and the contribution made by the local education authority.

Grants made available to Shropshire County Council in 1997–98

£

Grant title	*Shropshire*
Standards Fund	
School Effectiveness	1,255,500
School Improvement Initiatives	50,000
National Curriculum Assessment—Verification KS1	74,300
National Curriculum Assessment—Supply Cover KS1	111,500
Training for KS2 Teacher Assessment	59,500
KS3 Non-core Teacher Assessment	18,600
Primary Teachers' Subject Knowledge	160,700
Special Educational Needs	123,300
Qualifications—GNVQ Provision	95,900
Qualifications—Part One GNVQ Pilot	46,000
Pupil Behaviour and Discipline Centres	54,500
Bilingual Pupils	27,900
Drug Prevention and Schools	44,200
Training for Careers Teachers	36,700
Youth Service	12,700
National Professional Qualification for Headship	41,500
School Security	195,300
Child Protection	26,000
Specialist Schools	115,600
Baseline Assessment	86,500
Primary Performance Tables	5,600
Books for Schools	232,996
New Deal for Schools	
New Deal for Schools	185,000
Total	3,059,796

Grants made available in 1998–99 to Shropshire County Council and Telford and Wrekin Council

£

Grant title	*Shropshire*	*Telford and Wrekin*
Standards Fund		
School Effectiveness	922,707	473,347
School Leadership: NPQH	60,307	29,250
School Leadership: Serving Heads	20,102	9,750
Induction for Newly-Qualified Teachers	32,150	16,493
Early Years Training and Development	80,150	25,025
Reduction of Infant Class Sizes	—	291,000
Baseline Assessment	63,632	32,044
Assessment: Verification KS1	26,194	23,088
Assessment: Supply Cover	69,059	45,732
Training for KS2 Teacher Assessment	38,516	21,398
Effective use of National Curriculum Results	40,786	19,902
National Literacy Strategy—Primary	303,225	181,723
Summer Literacy Schools	18,000	20,000
Family Literacy	28,000	28,000
Special Educational Needs	122,720	—
Qualifications: GNVQ, AS/A Level, Key Skills etc.	92,141	24,701
Qualifications: Part One GNVQ Pilot	10,000	—
Work Related Learning at KS4	—	50,000
Improving Attendance	—	99,250
Improving Behaviour	—	117,000
Improving Attendance and Behaviour	36,100	—
Behaviour and Discipline Projects	—	54,600
Drug Prevention	40,080	21,098
Youth Service	12,807	5,000
School Security	128,600	65,972
Specialist Schools	116,900	—
National Grid for Learning	672,000	322,792
Books for Schools	152,911	81,739
Children's Parliament	190	110
Year 6 Literacy and Numeracy Booster Classes	94,449	46,980
Numeracy Consultants and Leading Maths Teacher	3,740	1,870
Capital Work to reduce class sizes	591,000	328,700
Removal of Outside Toilets	329,725	—
Energy Management	71,243	40,025
New Deal for Schools		
New Deal for Schools	823,348	442,200
Total	5,000,782	2,918,789

Public Employment Services

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the cost to public funds of increasing the capacity of the Public Employment Services as suggested in the explanatory memorandum on European Community document Com (1998) 641 final. [68350]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The measures referred to in the European Document are consistent with the existing role of the Employment Service in the delivery of the UK Employment Action Plan, which sets out the UK's approach to implementing the Employment Guidelines. No further costs are envisaged.

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if his Department will continue to have the main responsibility in Wales for policy questions arising from the Commission

communication "Modernising Public Employment Services" to support the European Employment Strategy after the establishment of the Welsh Assembly. [68348]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The proposals for the future role of public Employment Services, outlined in the Commission communication "Modernising Public Employment Services" to support the European Employment Strategy, relates to reserved matters for which the Secretary of State for Education and Employment will retain policy responsibility after the establishment of the Welsh Assembly.

Nursery Places

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if the Government funds nursery places on the assumption of 100 per cent. take-up. [68326]

Ms Hodge: Early education places for 4-year-olds in maintained schools are funded through Education Standard Spending according to the number of eligible pupils in the Annual Schools' Census; places in the private and voluntary sectors, together with additional places in the maintained sector, attract a per capita grant calculated from termly headcounts.

Special Educational Needs

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what provision his Department has made for the funding of early years provision in the private and voluntary sectors for 4-year-olds with special educational needs. [68323]

Ms Hodge: Local Education Authorities have a duty to arrange the provision specified in a child's statement of special educational needs. They also have the power to supply goods and services to providers of early years education in the private and voluntary sectors to help support 4-year-olds who have special educational needs but who do not have statements. The cost of providing additional support is reflected in each Local Education Authority's SSA allocation.

Pay and Performance Management

Mr. Darvill: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the technical consultation document on pay and performance management following the Green Paper "Teachers: Meeting the Challenge of Change". [68913]

Mr. Blunkett: I am pleased to announce that, following up the Green Paper "Teachers: Meeting the Challenge of Change", my Department has today published a Technical Consultation Document on Pay and Performance Management. Copies are available in the Vote Office and the Library.

School Teachers Review Body

Mr. Fitzpatrick: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the report of the School Teachers Review Body. [68914]

Mr. Blunkett: The 1999 report of the School Teachers' Review Body has been published today. Copies are available in the Vote Office and the Library. I am grateful to the Chairman and members of the Review Body for their work.

In the Comprehensive Spending Review, the Government made it clear that public sector pay settlements would need to be fair, affordable, and consistent with the targets for public service improvements we have set. That is why new arrangements were announced in the CSR for the Pay Review Bodies, designed to ensure a closer and more effective link between pay settlements and departmental expenditure limits and service delivery targets. As part of these arrangements, the Prime Minister asked the School Teachers' Review Body to ensure that, in making its recommendations, four key considerations set out in the CSR were taken into account:

- recruitment, retention and motivation of the groups concerned
- the requirements on Departments to meet their output targets for the delivery of services
- requirements on departments to stay within their three year expenditure limits, and
- the Government's inflation target, requiring responsibility in pay settlements across the public and private sectors.

I am satisfied that the recommendations meet these considerations. Accordingly I have decided to accept the Review Body's main recommendations to restructure the pay of headteachers from September, at a cost of 0.1% of the total teacher paybill in 1999–2000 and 0.2% in a full year, and to award a general increase of 3.5% to the pay of all teachers from 1 April. The full cost of the settlement in 1999–2000 will be 3.6%. This will be affordable within my Department's Expenditure Limits announced in the CSR in July (Cm 4011), and is fully consistent with the targets for improved services set out in my Department's Public Service Agreement published in December (Cm 4181). It is in line with the Government's prudent and disciplined approach to public spending and its commitment to deliver high quality public services and low inflation.

The restructuring of headteachers' pay is necessary to enable schools, especially small primary schools, to recruit, retain and motivate headteachers of the quality that we need to improve standards of education. It recognises the role headteachers will play in making the proposals in the Green Paper "Teachers: Meeting the Challenge of Change" work, and it recognises the responsibility headteachers have always had for managing and improving the performance of their teachers and schools. The Review Body makes it clear that headteachers' pay should be linked to their performance against agreed targets, with no automatic increases. It recommends improvements in the performance management and review mechanism for headteachers and I propose those improvements, subject to consultation, with effect from September 1999.

I am grateful to the Review Body for recommending a general increase at a level which is fair and which I can implement without staging. I hope teachers will welcome the fact that they will receive their pay increase in full on 1 April this year.

The Green Paper published in December 1998 set out the Government's wide-ranging proposals for modernising and strengthening the teaching profession. An extensive consultation is now underway. This current pay settlement is an excellent springboard for the further changes from September 2000 which I hope to put in place following the consultation, and the continuing advice of the Review Body. These changes will make the

teaching profession better paid and more attractive, and they will also create better links between pay and performance. I welcome the Review Body's constructive approach to the need to reward good performance, and I look forward to next year's exercise extending this approach to the determination of the pay of all teachers.

I will not initiate consultation with the teacher associations, the employers' organisations and other interested parties, as required under section (2)1 of the School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Act 1991, before I make provision by order for teachers' pay and conditions in 1999–2000.

National Year of Reading

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the cost of the television advertisement and booklet accompanying the National Year of Reading. [68525]

Mr. Mudie: The cost of the television advertisement was £1,400,000.

The cost of producing the accompanying booklet was £177,000 for the English language version with a further £46,000 for ethnic minority language, Braille and audio cassette versions.

We had requests for 822,000 leaflets from parents and schools following the advertising campaign which emphasised the valuable contribution which parents can make to their children's reading.

Teachers (Pay)

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate the total cost of increasing teachers' salaries by *(a)* 0.1 per cent., *(b)* 3.5 per cent., *(c)* 4.0 per cent. and *(d)* 4.5 per cent. [68215]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The figures in England and Wales are as follows: *(a)* £12 million, *(b)* £423 million, *(c)* £484 million, and *(d)* £544 million. Figures for England alone are: *(a)* £11 million, *(b)* £398 million, *(c)* £454 million and *(d)* £511 million.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much of the extra expenditure on education over the next three years, announced in the Comprehensive Spending Review, has been set aside to fund increases in teachers' pay in each year. [68218]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The cost of teachers' pay awards in 1999–2000, 2000–01 and 2001–02 will be contained within the Department Expenditure Limits announced in the Comprehensive Spending Review in July (Cm 4011). In respect of 2000–01 and 2001–02, up to £1 billion is available within the Departmental Expenditure Limits to support implementation of proposals in the Green Paper "Teachers: Meeting the Challenge of Change".

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if the next teachers' pay award will be funded in full by central Government. [68718]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment today to my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick), *Official Report*, columns *487–89*.

Failing LEAs (Contractors)

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* profit-making organisations and *(b)* non-profit-making organisations have requested details of his Department's proposals to allow contractors to take over key functions of failing local education authorities, in response to his Department's recent advertisement. [68530]

Ms Estelle Morris: Our recent advertisements asked for expressions of interest from organisations able to perform LEA functions and those able to provide management consultancy services. As of Wednesday, 27 January, my Department had sent out information about both consultancy and the provision of functions to 644 interested parties. The deadline for the receipt of formal expressions of interest is 15 February.

Teachers (Upper Salary Scale)

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimates his Department has made of the number of teachers who would qualify to transfer to the upper salary scale proposed in his recent Green Paper, "Teachers: Meeting the Challenge of Change". [68529]

Ms Estelle Morris: In order to pass the new performance threshold proposed in the Green Paper "Teachers: Meeting the Challenge of Change" (Cm 4164), teachers would have to demonstrate that they had consistently achieved national standards centred on strong classroom performance. The number of teachers transferring to the upper salary spine will depend on the outcomes of individual assessments against these national standards. The Government expect that, over time, a majority of teachers will be of a standard to pass the threshold if they wish to do so.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment whether supply teachers will be eligible to apply for the performance assessment for transfer to the upper salary scale proposed in his recent Green Paper; and who would be responsible for carrying out such an assessment. [68526]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Technical Consultation Document on Pay and Performance Management following up the Green Paper "Teachers: Meeting the Challenge of Change" was published today. In it we confirm that unattached teachers and supply teachers employed by the local education authority will be able to apply for threshold assessment provided that they have reached spine point 9 for qualifications and experience and if they can demonstrate that they meet the national threshold standards. Normally, their applications would be assessed by the relevant head, teacher in charge or senior manager with appropriate line management responsibility, and validated by an external assessor. In exceptional circumstances, the teacher may need to apply direct to the external assessor through the local education authority.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate his Department has made of the additional cost to the teachers' salary bill of *(a)* 25 per cent., *(b)* 50 per cent. and *(c)* 75 per cent. of teachers progressing to the upper salary scale proposed in his recent Green Paper. [68528]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Green Paper "Teachers: Meeting the Challenge of Change" proposes that teachers successful at the new performance threshold could receive a salary increase of up to 10 per cent. It would be for governing bodies to decide, on the advice of the head, where on the upper pay spine to place teachers who had passed the threshold assessment, assigned on a combination of excellent performance and extra responsibility. This decision will determine the exact salary level for each teacher.

As estimated 220,000 full-time equivalent teachers in England will have reached spine point nine for qualifications and experience by September 1999 and will therefore be eligible to apply for assessment at the performance threshold to the new upper pay spine.

For every £1,000 of average salary increase, the annual paybill cost of 25 per cent. or 50 per cent. or 75 per cent. pa`sing would be some £65 million or £125 million or £190 million respectively.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what role he proposes for the School Teachers' Review Body in determining salaries for teachers on the upper salary scale proposed in his recent Green Paper. [68527]

Ms Estelle Morris: Following the outcome of the consultation on the Green Paper "Teachers: Meeting the Challenge of Change", the Secretary of State will be asking the School Teachers' Review Body to make recommendations which would also cover the values of pay points on the proposed upper salary spine.

Fair Funding Proposals

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will introduce regulations to prevent local authorities from funding the cost of any redundancies amongst local authority staff, arising from reduced use of local authority services by schools under the Government's Fair Funding proposals, from the Individual Schools Budget; and if he will make a statement. [68219]

Ms Estelle Morris: The statutory guidance on school financing schemes recently issued by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State does not envisage that redundancy costs should be met from schools' budget shares where the staff in question were not school-based. There would therefore seem to be no reason why local education authorities should wish to include provision for such costs in their Individual Schools Budgets. The Financing of Maintained Schools Regulations 1999 permit the central retention by LEAs of funds to meet redundancy costs which are not properly chargeable to individual schools.

GCSE (Digital Broadcasts)

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what consultation he has undertaken with and what representations he has received from *(a)* the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, *(b)* the teacher trade unions, *(c)* examination boards, *(d)* employers' organisations and *(e)* further and higher education institutions, on the principle of the establishment of digital broadcasting services to support the GCSE curriculum. [68214]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The potential role of digital broadcasting services was raised in consultation on the National Grid for Learning, launched in October 1997. As well as being publicly available, the consultation document ("Connecting the Learning Society") was widely distributed, including to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), teacher organisations, further and higher education institutions and examination boards, and employer organisations. DfEE received almost 1,000 responses to the consultation. The outcomes of consultation were published in 'The Grid—Your Views', and are available on the Internet at http://www.vtc.ngfl.gov.uk/vtc/library/pub.html.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment from which budgetary head funds will be made available for the provision of specific digital broadcasting services to support the GCSE curriculum. [68217]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Funds for any educational broadcasting service to support the GCSE curriculum will be paid from programme expenditure within DfEE's expenditure limit.

Schools (Digital Broadcasts)

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many schools currently have facilities to enable the reception of digital broadcasting services; and what is his estimate of how many will have such facilities by the end of *(a)* 2000, *(b)* 2001 and *(c)* 2002. [68216]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Such equipment is only now becoming available and schools may deploy resources within the National Grid for Learning Standards Fund Grant to make appropriate purchases. Take-up will be assessed in the 1999 DfEE survey of information and communications technology (ICT) in schools.

Adjudicators

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 3 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *244*, if he will make a statement on the appointment of adjudicators as provided under the School Standards and Framework Act 1998. [68531]

Ms Estelle Morris: I refer to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment on Thursday 28 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *480*.

Equal Opportunities Commission

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement about the role of the Advisory Committee members of the Equal Opportunities Commission; and what remuneration members of the Committee receive. [68521]

Ms Hodge: The Equal Opportunities Commission is an executive non-Departmental public body established under the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 with a statutory remit to work towards the elimination of discrimination, to promote equality of opportunity between men and women, and to keep under review the workings of the Sex Discrimination Act and the Equal Pay Act 1970. It is not

an Advisory Committee. The Commission comprises up to 15 Commissioners. The Chair's salary for 1998–99 was set at £48,930. The two Deputy Chairs receive a daily fee of £237. Other Commissioners receive a daily fee of £123.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Chevening House

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on how many occasions he has made use of Chevening House; and how many of these occasions have included *(a)* official Government business and *(b)* the reception of official visitors. [66006]

Mr. Robin Cook: The running costs of Chevening House and Estate are borne not by the Government but by the Chevening Trust. I meet the costs of food, drink and laundry for myself, my family and private guests.

I chaired a meeting at Chevening House on 5 January 1999 to discuss medium-term strategy for the FCO.

I hosted a dinner for the US Foreign Minister, Mrs. Madeleine Albright, on 27 December 1997, and had a meeting with the Dutch Foreign Minister, Mr. Jozias van Aartsen, on 17 August 1998.

Government Communications Headquarters

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the total cost of the compensation for loss of pension rights which his Department has agreed to pay to the 14 former employees of GCHQ. [66489]

Mr. Robin Cook *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* The additional pension benefits will be provided through a special scheme under the Superannuation Act 1972. That scheme will be limited to the fourteen who were dismissed. The level of compensation will reflect two factors; the impact on pensionable pay on retirement of the decisions about pay taken by GCHQ in the light of the refusal of the fourteen to resign from their trade union; and the loss of pensionable service. The cost will be met from within existing resources.

European Commission (Firearms)

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the eligibility of European Commission protection officers to carry firearms in the United Kingdom. [67451]

Ms Quin: The eligibility of European Commission protection officers to carry firearms in the United Kingdom is the responsibility of the Home Office, and subject to the issuing of a permit by the Metropolitan Police under the authority of the Home Secretary. To date, no such permit has been issued to a Commission protection officer. One would be issued only in exceptional circumstances, and then only if the protection officer were accompanied by an armed Metropolitan Police Special Branch Officer.

Muslim Council of Britain

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the recent meeting with the Muslim Council of Britain. [67960]

Mr. Fatchett: I met a range of representatives of the British Muslim Community including the Muslim Council of Britain on 20 January. I briefed them on the situation regarding the British nationals currently being held in Yemen, especially the efforts made so far by Ministers and FCO officials on behalf of the detainees. I reassured them that all British Citizens are given equal consular protection and support, regardless of their creed, race or religion.

India

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his recent meeting with the Special Envoy of the Prime Minister of India. [67958]

Mr. Fatchett: I had wide ranging talks with Mr. Mishra and Indian officials on various issues of mutual interest.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to visit India. [67959]

Mr. Fatchett: Neither my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary nor I have any plans to visit India at present. I visited India in November 1998, when I was able to hold a range of bilateral talks.

Entry Clearance Interviews

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he plans to announce which post will be used as a pilot for the recording of entry clearance interviews. [67957]

Mr. Fatchett: This Department is consulting candidate Posts and preparing the necessary procedures for the pilot project. I expect this preparatory process to take several weeks. We will announce the name of the Post chosen for the pilot scheme as soon as possible.

Bangladesh

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he plans to announce the name of the new British High Commissioner to Bangladesh. [67961]

Mr. Fatchett: There is no date for this announcement yet. It is normal procedure to announce appointments three to four months in advance of change over.

Electro-shock Batons

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what end use monitoring his Department has undertaken into the use of the electro-shock batons trans-shipped from the United States to Saudi Arabia via the United Kingdom in 1993. [68189]

Mr. Fatchett: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office does not routinely undertake end-use monitoring once an export licence has been granted; potential end-use considerations are taken into account as part of the licence handling process before export. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary announced on 28 July 1997, *Official Report*, columns *65–66*, a ban on the export of electro-shock equipment and other equipment which could be used for torture.

British Council

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the British Council's record of investment in *(a)* its premises and *(b)* information technology. [68307]

Mr. Fatchett: The British Council's investment strategy is discussed with the FCO as part of the process of agreeing the Council's Corporate Plan. The Council requires the prior approval of the FCO for investment of over £500,000 for property and £250,000 for other projects, and it is responsible for preparing post-project appraisals.

Departmental Responsibilities

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what responsibilities which his Department had prior to the Comprehensive Spending Review are to be *(a)* discontinued by his Department, *(b)* transferred to another department, *(c)* transferred to an executive agency and *(d)* added to his Department over the period 1998–99 to 2001–02. [68401]

Mr. Fatchett: The information is as follows:

(a) None;

(b) None;

(c) None;

(d) In 1998–99, the FCO became the sole sponsor Department for the British Council's work as the UK's principal agency for cultural relations abroad. This will not affect the level of Government funding (previously shared with DFID).

Departmental Legislation

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what additional legislation, not currently before Parliament, was assumed in the production of his Department's spending allocation for 1999–2000 to 2001–02 in the Comprehensive Spending Review. [68417]

Mr. Fatchett: There is a long-standing convention that legislative proposals for each year are not announced before the Queen's Speech at the start of the relevant Session.

Chevening Scholarships

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many Chevening scholarships have been awarded, and at what cost, in each of the past five years. [68337]

Mr. Fatchett: The numbers and costs of Chevening Scholarships awarded in the past five years are:

Year	*Scholars*[1]	*£ million*
1998–99	3,967	27.2
1997–98	4,053	27
1996–97	3,967	25.8
1995–96	3,967	26.9
1994–95	3,880	24.9

[1] Including both new scholars and continuing awards

These figures include the jointly funded Chevening awards, co-sponsored by the FCO, British universities, and commercial and other partners.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the Chevening scholarship programme; how many scholarships, at what cost are planned for the next three years; and if he will make a statement. [68338]

Mr. Fatchett: The Chevening scholarship programme is our main scholarship scheme overseas. It is co-funded by the FCO and DfID. It has a well developed procedure for selection of students, and for maintaining contact when they return home. Chevening Scholars benefit from studying at Higher Education Institutions in the UK, experience the British way of life, make valuable contacts with British counterparts, and return home with a better understanding of the UK and of British values. On return home they make an important contribution to the life of their own countries.

The estimated numbers of Chevening awards and costs for the next three years, assuming the present basis of funding continues, are:

Year	*Scholars*[1]	*£ million*
1999–2000	3,985	30
2000–01	4,025	30.2
2001–02	4,065	30.6

[1] Including both new scholars and continuing awards

These figures include the jointly funded Chevening awards, co-sponsored by the FCO, British universities, and commercial and other partners. A cross-Whitehall study is being undertaken of how to attract more foreign students to the UK. An assessment of the Chevening scheme is included in this study.

Arms Exports

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he will publish the first annual report on arms exports. [68791]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The report will be published as soon as possible.

Gibraltar

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Wrexham (Dr. Marek) of 19 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns *436–37*, for what reasons his Department describes the Bay of Gibraltar as the Bay of Algeciras; and when it first adopted this description. [68523]

Ms Quin: The bay to the west of Gibraltar is known both as the Bay of Gibraltar and the Bay of Algeciras. The extent of British Territorial Waters in the bay is as described in my answer of 19 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns *436–37*, to the hon. Member for Wrexham (Dr. Marek).

Senator Pinochet

Mr. Trend: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 25 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns *148–49*, concerning Senator Pinochet, what discussions his

Department held with the Chilean Embassy on 15–16 October about the possible arrest of Senator Pinochet. [68491]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The discussions with the Chilean Ambassador on 15 and 16 October referred to in my earlier answer took place before the receipt of the request from the Spanish authorities for the provisional arrest of Senator Pinochet and did not relate to that subject.

Mr. Trend: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 25 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns *148–49*, concerning Senator Pinochet, if his Department informed the Chilean Ambassador on 16 October that the Metropolitan Police were interested in Senator Pinochet's possible diplomatic immunity. [68490]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: No. The inquiry from the Metropolitan Police about Senator Pinochet's possible diplomatic immunity was received after the telephone conversation between this Department and the Chilean Ambassador.

Mr. Trend: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 25 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns *148–49*, concerning General Pinochet, if the discussions between his Department and the Metropolitan Police on 16 October 1998 took place before his Department was telephoned by the Chilean Ambassador on 16 October. [68489]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The contacts with the Metropolitan Police concerning immunity took place after the conversation with the Chilean Ambassador on 16 October. Contacts with the Metropolitan Police before the conversation on 16 October concerned only the request from the 5th Central Magistrate's Court in Madrid to interview Senator Pinochet, received on 14 October and of which the Chilean Ambassador was aware.

Export Licences

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what export licences have been granted since 1 May 1997 for the export of land mines; if he will list the countries and the dates when the licences were granted; and how many land mines were included under each export licence. [64523]

Dr. Howells: I have been asked to reply.

The export of land mines is controlled under entry ML4 in the Export of Goods (Control) Order, which also covers bombs, torpedoes, rockets, missiles and related equipment and accessories. The entry in the legislation under which the export of goods is controlled is known as their rating.

The Export Control Organisation's computer databases have been interrogated and the following results were obtained. Between 2 May 1997 and 4 December 1998, 890 individual licences were issued covering the export of goods with the relevant rating: 844 Standard Individual Export Licences and 46 Open Individual Export Licences (OIELs).

It would entail disproportionate cost to determine if any of these licences covered land mines. However, I refer my right hon. Friend to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson) on 21 May 1997, *Official Report*, columns *72–73*, which set out the Government's policy on the import, export, transfer, manufacture and use of anti-personnel land mines.

The information on licences should be considered in light of the answer given by the then Minister for Small Firms, Trade and Industry, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), to my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) on 30 October 1997, *Official Report*, columns *870–71*.

The Government are also committed to reporting annually on the state of strategic export controls and their application. As the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd), stated in his answer of 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *149*, to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones), the annual report will list by country of destination the numbers of export licences issued in each equipment category and give details of the military equipment for which licences have been granted. This information will also be given in future reports.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Hollis Industries Plc

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when his Department received the letter of 15 July from the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), passed on by the Registrar of Companies, regarding alleged accounting offences by Hollis Industries plc. [65593]

Mr. Byers: On 17 July 1998.

Rt. Hon. Member for Hartlepool

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on what date the Permanent Secretary to the Department of Trade and Industry was informed of the loan from the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson) to the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson). [65598]

Mr. Byers: On 17 December 1998.

Post Office

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what limits the Government have set on Post Office expenditure on acquisitions this year and next; and what is his current forecast of the Post Office contribution to the public sector's revenues; [66228]

(2) what assessment he has made of the impact of the acquisition of German Parcels on *(a)* the Post Office's net cash generation and *(b)* the level of overall public borrowing. [66153]

Mr. Byers: Under the new financial framework for the Post Office, announced in the House on 7 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns 21–24, by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), the proportion of profits removed from the business will be halved, enabling it to finance greater levels of investment.

In addition, the Government recognise that larger growth investments may require prudent borrowing. Post Office proposals for the largest strategic investments, including acquisitions, will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

The Post Office contribution to the public sector (apart from normal corporate taxes) was expected to be £310 million for 1998–99, and £207 million for 1999–2000, the latter based on an estimate of 50 per cent. of post-tax profits. Adjustments to these external financing limits to take account of UK borrowing to finance the purchase of German Parcels will be made shortly.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the cost to the Post Office of the acquisition of German Parcels. [66154]

Mr. Byers: The Post Office has asked that the precise details of this specific transaction not be released for reasons of commercial confidentiality. The financial implications of Post Office investments will properly be reflected in both published Government and Post Office accounts.

Regional Aid

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what proposals he intends to submit to the European Commission on the designation of new assisted areas for regional selective assistance. [66132]

Mr. Byers: No decisions have yet been made on the areas that will be proposed to the European Commission.

Siemens

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will require Siemens to repay their start-up grant. [66134]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* I refer the right hon. Member to the reply given to him on 9 November 1998, *Official Report,* columns *57–58.*

Armscor

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what investigations Her Majesty's Government have carried out into the affairs of Armscor; [65125]

(2) what dealings representatives of Her Majesty's Government have had with Armscor. [65126]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* Since the April 1994 democratic elections in South Africa, the Government, primarily through the Ministry of Defence, have had some contact with Armscor.

The DTI has not carried out any investigations into the affairs of Armscor. However, a Customs and Excise investigation into alleged breaches of UK export controls led to proceedings being initiated in 1984 against four South Africans connected with Armscor. The four were bailed, but failed to return for trial. The charges were withdrawn in December 1994.

Export Licences

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the quantity of small arms for which export licences were granted in each of the last five years in respect of *(a)* China, *(b)* Zambia, *(c)* the Sudan and *(d)* Serbia and Montenegro. [65884]

Dr. Howells: The export of specified small arms is controlled under entries ML1 and PL5018 in the Export of Goods (Control) Order, which also cover specified accessories and specially designed components. The entry in the legislation under which the export of goods is controlled is known as their rating.

The Export Control Organisation's computer databases have been interrogated and the following results were obtained. Between 1 January 1994 and 31 December 1998, 60 Standard Individual Export Licences (SIELs) were issued covering the export to consignees or end-users in Zambia of goods covered by these ratings. Two Open Individual Export Licences (OIELs) were also issued covering such exports on which Zambia was a permitted destination. It would entail disproportionate cost to determine the quantity of small arms covered by these licences.

Individual licences issued in each year covering the export to Zambia of goods with the ratings ML1 or PL5018

	Ratings ML1		*Ratings PL5018*	
	Number of SIELs issued covering goods with rating	*Number of OIELs issued covering goods with rating*	*Number of SIELs issued covering goods with rating*	*Number of OIELs issued covering goods with rating*
1994	9	0	6	0
1995	10	0	12	0
1996	12	0	6	0
1997	5	0	1	0
1998	1	2	0	0

In the same period, no individual export licences were issued for the export of goods with these ratings to consignees or end-users in the People's Republic of China, Sudan or the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

This information should be considered in light of the answer given by my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche) to my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) on 30 October 1997, *Official Report,* columns *870–71.*

There is no internationally agreed definition of "small arms". It is possible that some weapons controlled under other ratings could be called small arms; for instance a 12-bore shotgun with a calibre greater than 12.7mm would be controlled under entry ML2.

Certain Open General Export Licences (OGELs) cover, for a range of specified countries (including Zambia), the return of weapons controlled under entries ML1 and PL5018, subject to the conditions of the licence in each case. These include the Open General Export Licence (Export After Repair: Military Goods). Zambia is also a permitted destination on the Open General Export Licence (Export After Exhibition: Military Goods). The export of such weapons to Zambia is also covered by the Open General Export Licence (Export for Repair/Replacement Under Warranty: Military Goods). Copies of all Open General Export Licences valid at any time during the

period are in the Library of the House. No OGELs cover the export of such goods to the People's Republic of China, Sudan or the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many licences have been granted for the export of military and paramilitary goods to Sri Lanka for the last five years, in each case listing the categories under which the licences were issued. [66377]

Dr. Howells: The entry in the relevant legislation under which the export of goods is controlled is known as their rating.

The Export Control Organisation's computer databases have been interrogated and the following results were obtained. Between 1 January 1994 and 31 December 1998, 360 Standard Individual Export Licences (SIELs) and 34 Open Individual Export Licences (OIELs) were issued covering the export to consignees or end-users in Sri Lanka of goods subject to export control by being listed in Part III of Schedule 1 to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, the so-called Military List. Individual licences may cover a range of goods with various ratings. Where this is so, the licence is included in the Table in the total for all of the relevant ratings.

Individual Licences issued between 1 January 1994 and 31 December 1998 covering the export to Sri Lanka of goods on the Military List

Rating	*Number of SIELs issued covering goods with this rating*	*Number of OIELs issued covering goods with this rating*
ML1	73	1
ML2	16	1
ML3	35	1
ML4	45	4
ML5	14	3
ML6	10	3
ML7	4	0
ML8	1	1
ML9	4	0
ML10	12	8
ML11	102	8
ML13	6	6
ML14	5	1
ML15	22	1
ML18	0	3
ML21	2	2
ML22	3	1
PL5001	2	1
PL5002	8	0
PL5006	1	0
PL5017	2	1
PL5018	6	0
PL5021	3	0
PL5027	1	0
PL5030	2	0

This information does not cover any Media OIELs that may have been issued during this period. Media OIELs authorise the export to all destinations of protective clothing, mainly for the protection of aid agency workers and journalists, when working in areas of conflict.

This information should be considered in light of the answer given by my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche) to my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) on 30 October 1997, *Official Report*, columns *870–71*.

In addition, certain goods on the Military List may have been exported to Sri Lanka under certain Open General Export Licences; copies of all Open General Export Licences valid at any time during the period are in the Library of the House.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many applications for the export of *(a)* paramilitary, *(b)* security and *(c)* police equipment to Indonesia have been (i) granted, (ii) refused and (iii) revoked since 10 May 1998; and if he will indicate the export licence category in each case. [66616]

Dr. Howells: The entry in the relevant legislation under which the export of goods is controlled is known as their rating.

The Export Control Organisation's computer databases have been interrogated and the following results were obtained. Between 11 May and 31 December 1998, 17 Standard Individual Export Licences (SIELs) and 8 Open Individual Export Licences (OIELs) were issued covering the export to consignees or end-users in Indonesia of goods subject to export control by being listed in Part III of Schedule 1 to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, the so-called Military List. In the same period, no such licences were revoked and one standard individual export licence application, covering goods with a rating of ML1, was refused.

Individual licences may cover a range of goods with various ratings. Where this is so, the licence is included in the Table in the total for all of the relevant ratings.

Individual licences issued between 10 May and 31 December 1998 covering the export to Indonesia of goods on the Military List

Rating	*Number of SIELs issued covering goods with this rating*	*Number of OIELs issued covering goods with this rating*
ML4	0	1
ML5	1	1
ML6	0	1
ML9	1	0
ML10	11	3
ML11	3	4
ML14	0	1
ML15	0	1
ML21	1	2
ML22	0	2
PL5017	2	0

This information should be considered in light of the answer my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche) gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) on 30 October 1997, *Official Report*, columns *870–71*.

In addition, goods on the Military List may have been exported to Indonesia under certain Open General Export Licences; copies of all Open General Export Licences valid at any time during the period are in the Library of the House.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green said in her answers to my hon. Friend of 8 April 1998, *Official Report*, columns *345–46*, and 3 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *227*, it is not possible to break

down these data in the manner requested as the equipment covered by many entries in the Military List could be used by military, paramilitary or police end-users.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what export licences are required for *(a)* military goods and *(b)* dual-use goods exported by the Crown. [66236]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* The export of controlled military goods is controlled under the Export of Goods (Control) Order, made under the provisions of the Import, Export and Customs Powers (Defence) Act 1939. As the 1939 Act does not bind the Crown, no licence is required. As regards exports of dual-use goods, I refer the hon. Member to the answer of 1 December 1998 to my hon. Friend the Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan), *Official Report*, columns *123–24*.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what licences have been granted to the Crown Agents since 1 May 1997 for military or dual-use goods, by category; [66237]

(2) if he will list the export licences for tear gas or plastic bullets *(a)* given to and *(b)* applied for by the Crown Agents since 1 May 1997; [66239]

(3) how many export licences have been given to the Crown Agents since 1 May 1997 for goods in the ML7 category. [66240]

Dr. Howells *[holding answers 19 January 1999]:* I will write to the hon. Member as soon as possible, and place a copy of that letter in the Library of the House.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what export licences have been issued to International Military Sales Ltd. since 1 May 1997; [66242]

(2) what documentation has been required for export licences issued to International Military Sales Ltd. [66243]

Dr. Howells *[holding answers 19 January 1999]:* The Export Control Organisation's computer databases have been interrogated, and no standard or open individual licences are recorded as having been issued to this company between 2 May 1997 and 31 December 1998. This information should be considered in light of the answer given by my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche) to my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) on 30 October 1997, *Official Report*, columns *870–71*.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what military or dual-use goods have been exported without licences by the Crown Agents since 1 May 1997, by category. [66238]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* The Export Control Organisation of the Department of Trade and Industry maintains records of applications for licences required under the Export of Goods (Control) Order (1994), EC Regulation 3381–94 and related Council Decision 94/942/CFSP, or the Dual-Use and Related Goods (Export Control) Regulations 1996. It does not compile records either of licensed exports or of exports for which no licence has been issued.

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the export licences granted to Procurement Services International to export military equipment to Indonesia. [67593]

Dr. Howells: I will write to my hon. Friend as soon as possible, and place a copy of that letter in the Library of the House.

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list military equipment exported to Indonesia since 1 May 1997. [67602]

Dr. Howells: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by the then President of the Board of Trade on 2 December 1997, *Official Report*, columns *124–26*, to the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) and my predecessor's replies of 8 April 1998, *Official Report*, columns *345–46*, and of 3 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *227*, and to PQ number 66616 tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), answered today, *Official Report*, columns *502–03*.

I would also refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd), to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones) on 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *149*.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to introduce legislation to regulate the overseas licensed production and export of military, security and police equipment by a UK company in a second country; and what representations he has received on these matters. [66891]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) on 12 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns *149–50*, and to the answers given by my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche) to my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, South-West (Ms Jones) on 14 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *364*, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley on 12 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *151*.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the operation by other states of a legal right to advance public scrutiny of export licence applications for military, security and police equipment transfers. [66893]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* In the course of our review of the proposals contained in the White Paper on Strategic Export Controls in the light of responses received, we are also examining, where it is relevant to do so, legislation and practice in other countries.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what measures are currently available to prevent British manufacturers of equipment entered in Part III of Schedule I to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, from licensing production in countries where such equipment might be used for internal repression or international aggression, or pose a risk to regional stability; [67896]

(2) what measures he is taking to ensure that UK and European export control mechanisms are not undermined by licensed production agreements; and if he will make a statement. [67892]

Dr. Howells: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer of 12 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns *149–50*, to my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd).

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many licences for the export of goods entered in Part III of Schedule I to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994 to Indonesia have been granted and denied since 1 May 1997. [67895]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by the then President of the Board of Trade on 2 December 1997, *Official Report*, columns *124–26*, to the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) and my predecessor's replies of 8 April 1998, *Official Report*, columns *345–46* and of 3 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *227* and to PQ number 66616 tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), answered today, *Official Report*, columns *502–03*.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many licences for the export of goods entered in Part III of Schedule I to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994 have been granted since 1 May 1997 in respect of *(a)* Afghanistan, *(b)* Angola, *(c)* Rwanda and *(d)* Yugoslavia. [67898]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* The entry in the relevant legislation under which the export of goods is controlled is known as their rating. The Export Control Organisation's computer databases have been interrogated and the following results were obtained. Between 2 May 1997 and 8 January 1999, 23 standard individual export licences (SIELs) were issued covering the export to consignees or end-users in the specified countries of goods subject to export control by being listed in Part III of Schedule I to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, the so-called Military List. In the same period, no such Open Individual Export Licences were issued.

Individual licences may cover a range of goods with various ratings. Where this is so, the licence is included in the Table in the total for all the relevant ratings.

Individual licences issued between 2 May 1997 and 8 January 1999 covering the export of goods on the Military List

Rating	*Number of SIELs issued covering goods with this rating*
Afghanistan	
ML4	1
ML13	1
Angola	
ML4	1
ML6	4
ML11	7
ML13	1
PL5031	1
PL5033	1
Rwanda	
ML6	1
ML11	4

Individual licences issued between 2 May 1997 and 8 January 1999 covering the export of goods on the Military List

Rating	*Number of SIELs issued covering goods with this rating*
Federal Republic of Yugoslavia	
ML10	1

This information does not cover any Media OIELs that may have been issued during this period. Media OIELs authorise the export to all destinations of protective clothing, mainly for the protection of aid agency workers and journalists, when working in areas of conflict.

This information should be considered in light of my predecessor's answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) on 30 October 1997, *Official Report*, columns *870–71*.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the planned contents of the annual report on strategic export controls and their application as proposed in the White Paper "Strategic Export Controls". [66894]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd), to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones) on 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *149*.

British Airways

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) on what issues more progress is needed before a final decision can be announced on the application for approval of the alliance between British Airways and American Airlines; [66641]

(2) when he expects to be able to announce a final decision on the proposed alliance between British Airways and American Airlines; [66642]

(3) if he will place in the Library a copy of his predecessor's letter to British Airways in reply to a letter dated 2 December seeking deferment of a final decision on the alliance with American Airlines; and if he will make a statement. [66643]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* The Alliance cannot be implemented until my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Transport and the Regions has concluded a new liberalised air services agreement with the United States. I could not take a final decision on the alliance until the picture on the negotiations is clearer. Assuming satisfactory progress on the air services agreement, there would also need to be further work to be done on the details of slot allocation, and the industry wide issues identified by the Commission also need to be progressed. Given the current position, it is not possible for me to assess when I will be able to take a final decision.

The substance of my predecessor's letter to British Airways has already been made public. I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), on 17 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *697*.

Former Ministers

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many severance payments have been made to Ministers who have quit office in his Department since 2 May 1997; and if he will list *(a)* the former ministers concerned and *(b)* the sums paid. [66593]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* Severance payments to Ministers are made in accordance with the Ministerial and Other Pensions and Salaries Act 1991 which provides that Ministers who have not attained the age of 65, and are not reappointed to a relevant Ministerial or other paid office within three weeks of their leaving office are eligible for a severance payment of one quarter of the annual salary being paid.

Two Ministers who have left the Department since 2 May 1997 qualify for such payments—my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, South (Mr. Griffiths), who was Under-Secretary of State at the time of his departure, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), who was Secretary of State.

Minister for Science

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on what dates the Minister for Science resigned from the boards of *(a)* Diatech and *(b)* Innotech Innovation. [66695]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 20 January 1999]:* The Minister for Science resigned as a Director of Diatech Limited and of Innotech Investment Limited on 31 July 1998.

Local Deprivation Indicators

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which measures of local deprivation his Department and its agencies use in considering allocation of funds to local projects. [66720]

Mr. Wills: The DTI does not use measures of local deprivation in considering allocation of funds to local projects. Applications for regional selective assistance are considered on their merits, in accordance with the requirements of the Industrial Development Act 1982.

Energy Agencies

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will *(a)* list (i) the number of energy agencies in the United Kingdom and (ii) give details of how they are funded and *(b)* state what plans he has to increase the number of energy agencies in the United Kingdom. [67686]

Mr. Meale: I have been asked to reply.

Seventeen energy agencies have been established in the UK under the European Commission's SAVE II energy efficiency programme, and I understand that a further five are completing the contractual procedures. Detailed funding arrangements are a matter for the Commission and the agency concerned, though, in general, the SAVE II programme provides up to 150,000 Euros of start-up funding: after three years, the agencies are expected to become self financing. We publicise the annual call for proposals under the SAVE II programme, and encourage and assist UK interests to submit effective applications.

Electricity Supply (North Yorkshire)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what applications he has received for the continuation of the supply carried by the Lackenby-Picton-Shipton line beyond Shipton; [67466]

(2) if he will make a statement on the requirement for the National Grid to apply for further consents to transfer electricity south of Shipton; [67464]

(3) if the National Grid has obtained the necessary consents for its proposals for the transfer of power supply south of Shipton. [67465]

Mr. Battle: The Lackenby-Picton-Shipton line, for which various consents were granted on 26 March 1998, will connect with an existing line from Shipton to Osbaldwick which forms part of the national transmission system and which was granted consent in 1964. This will allow the transfer of electricity south of Shipton. No further applications have been received in respect of this transfer.

Departmental Papers (Access for Visually Impaired)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has for departmental *(a)* White and *(b)* Green Papers to be made available on floppy disk format in a form which facilitates access for the visually impaired. [67847]

Mr. Byers: We aim to make key departmental information as widely available as possible and to put departmental White and Green Papers on the DTI Internet web site. This is useful to people with visual impairments since they can adjust their software to increase the text size to meet their requirements.

It has not been our usual practice to offer texts on floppy disk simply because there has not been a demand. Availability of texts via the Internet may now be satisfying that demand but if we receive an ad hoc request for a text on disk we are happy to produce and supply it.

Officials are due to meet representatives of the RNIB in early February to discuss what further steps the Department could take to help the visually impaired access DTI material.

Death Penalty Equipment

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to introduce a ban on the brokering, promotion and installation of death penalty technology and equipment by UK companies; and what representations he has received on these matters. [66892]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary to my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth, North (Mr. Rapson) on 28 July 1997, *Official Report,* columns *65–66*, which announced a ban on the export of certain, specified equipment that has been used in torture. I understand that there is no present intention to extend the scope of this ban, and that there is no accepted definition of "death penalty technology", which could encompass technology relating to the production and use of a very wide range of items. The Government's proposals for new powers to control trafficking and brokering of the goods covered by the ban

announced by the Foreign Secretary were set out in the White Paper on Strategic Export Controls (Cm 3989), published in July 1998. The Government have received a number of responses to the White Paper, and regularly receive representations on various issues relating to strategic export controls.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 18 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns *359–60*, concerning the tendering process for the award of a contract by Action 2000 (1) which of the companies invited to tender have previously done work for Action 2000; [67443]

(2) what the closing date was for the receipt of tenders; and on what date a decision was made as to which tender was successful; [67445]

(3) on what date the three companies were invited to tender; and in what way the tender opportunity was advertised; [67444]

(4) on what date and where the three companies presented their proposals to Action 2000 and an independent representative from Business Link; [67442]

(5) how many companies were visited prior to the issue of invitations to tender; and what criteria were used in deciding which companies should be invited to tender. [67446]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* This detailed commercial information is a matter for the company. The question has therefore been drawn to the attention of the Chairman of Action 2000.

BSkyB (Manchester United)

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if his predecessor received advice from the Permanent Secretary at the Department of Trade and Industry that there was no conflict of interest which prevented him from dealing with competition issues arising from the proposed takeover by BSkyB of Manchester United. [67356]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), on 27 October 1998, *Official Report*, column *134*.

Departmental Staff (Travel)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the mileage rates currently applicable to staff, indicating what changes have been made to encourage staff to switch from cars to public transport and other less polluting forms of travel. [67492]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* Mileage rates paid to staff using their own cars for official business are as follows:

Engine Size	*Up to 4000 miles (standard rate) (p)*	*over 4000 miles (lower standard rate) (p)*
Up to 1500cc	35	20
1501–2000cc	45	25
over 2000cc	48	34

The rates for the two smaller categories of engine are Inland Revenue calculated Fixed Profit Car Scheme (FPCS) rates. However, for the over 2000cc category, DTI pays significantly lower rates than those published by the Inland Revenue. The DTI rates are 48p and 34p per mile compared to the FPCS rates of 63p and 36p per mile respectively. This policy was introduced to discourage use of large engined cars.

Other encouragements to use public transport, or less polluting forms of transport than cars are:

- a travel and subsistence policy that promotes the use of public transport over car use
- provision of interest free loans for season ticket and bicycle purchase
- provision of parking facilities for cycles in all DTI buildings and shower facilities in some.

DTI is currently reviewing its travel policy and will shortly be producing a green transport plan.

Football Clubs (Media Rights)

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on Government policy on football clubs buying media rights to football coverage. [67334]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 27 January 1999]:* I understand that the hon. Member is referring to the general issue of closer ownership ties between football clubs and media companies, and the possible impact which any such ties may have on the televising of football matches, football merchandising, and the choice available to football supporters.

On the question of ownership, the Director General of Fair Trading (DGFT) advises on acquisitions which qualify for investigation under the Fair Trading Act 1973. Where a merger raises concerns it can be referred to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission (MMC) for investigation. All cases are considered on their individual merits.

Separately from the arrangements for scrutinising mergers, if any links between media companies and football clubs were to lead to allegations of anti-competitive behaviour or abuse of a dominant position, then, in the first instance, it would be the responsibility of the DGFT to investigate the matter.

In addition, in April 1996 the DGFT referred to the Restrictive Practices Court (RPC) the FA Premier League rules and certain restrictions in agreements between the Premier League, BSkyB and the BBC for televising football. The case is now a matter for the RPC. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has no role in the RPC's procedures. It is for the parties to the agreements to demonstrate to the RPC that the restrictions in the agreements are not contrary to the public interest.

Nuclear Reprocessing

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will place in the Library a specimen contract between BNFL and a German utility covering reprocessing services, excluding any commercially confidential information. [68427]

Mr. Battle: The contracts between BNFL and its German customers are commercially confidential in their entirety, and therefore we are unable to do so.

Electronic Warfare

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to the answer of the Secretary of State for the Home Department of 25 January 1999, *Official Report*, column 75, on electronic warfare, what responsibilities of his Department for measures against information warfare will come within the lead responsibility of the Secretary of State for the Home Department. [68313]

Mr. Wills: The Home Secretary's new responsibilities to coordinate action across government and work with the private sector to ensure adequate protection for the UK's critical infrastructure were set out in his reply of 25 January. The specific responsibilities of individual Departments have not changed. The Department of Trade and Industry's responsibilities include the promotion of BS7799 (the Code of practice for Information security management) and the c:cure scheme (the scheme for accredited certification against BS7799). Responsibilities also include the relevant initiatives falling within industry sectors (such as telecommunications, oil, gas, electricity). This includes ensuring that these sectors have sufficient systems and controls to protect themselves against the possibility of attack.

Electricity Trading

Mr. Frank Cook: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he is taking to ensure that the reform of electricity trading arrangements are subject to an environmental assessment under the environmental policy guidelines. [68318]

Mr. Battle: An environmental appraisal was undertaken in respect of the Government's proposed electricity market reforms, including the reform of electricity trading arrangements, and this was published as part of the Conclusions of the Review of Energy Sources for Power Generation (Cm 4071). Environmental concerns will continue to be a central consideration throughout the process of implementing new electricity trading arrangements.

Working Time Directive

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of proposals to extend the Working Time Directive to the United Kingdom sector of the Continental Shelf in respect of *(a)* cost and *(b)* safety; and if he will make a statement. [68368]

Mr. Ian McCartney: On 18 November, the European Commission proposed to extend the Working Time Directive to the excluded sectors. This includes an estimated 20,000 offshore workers in the UK. We are considering the proposals carefully, and will seek to ensure they are balanced, sensible and do not adversely affect the competitiveness or the safety requirements of the industries concerned.

Due to difficulty in identifying workers within the excluded sectors the cost of applying the Working Time Directive to offshore workers was covered in the original assessment. A copy of this assessment has been placed in the House of Commons Library.

Central Arbitration Committee

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement about the current responsibility of the Central Arbitration Committee and his plans for extending it. [68628]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Central Arbitration Committee (CAC) currently hears complaints under section 181 of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992 that an employer has failed to disclose information to a recognised trade union for the purposes of collective bargaining. Under section 212 of that Act, it may also arbitrate in trade disputes referred to it by ACAS, though it has not done so for several years.

The Employment Relations Bill introduced on 27 January contains the Government's proposals both to extend the role of the CAC to deal with applications for trade union recognition and to revise the statutory administrative provisions governing the CAC.

Domestic Gas

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he has had about extending the domestic gas supply network in the United Kingdom; and what proposals there are for such extensions. [68377]

Mr. Battle: This is a matter for the Director General of Gas Supply (DGSS) who has duties under the Gas Act 1986 (as amended) to exercise his relevant functions to ensure that reasonable demands for gas conveyed through pipes are met where it is economical, and that there is effective competition in the conveyance of gas to new areas. There are now some seven Public Gas Transporters (PGTs). A consumer seeking a gas connection can either seek a connection from a PGT; purchase and lay the pipe himself, or his PGT can use the system of supplemental charges whereby the cost of the connection is recovered over a protracted period of time through an additional charge on each unit of gas used. I understand that a number of PGTs continue to be granted geographical extensions to their licences and that a growing number of premises is being connected to the main gas system.

SMEs (Internet)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to assist the establishment of free local telephone calls to encourage wider use of the Internet among small and medium enterprises. [68464]

Mr. Wills: Providing a local call service is not cost-free. Where free local calls are offered, this is usually tied to higher monthly standing charges. BT are free to package their tariffs as they wish as long as their overall prices fall within the price cap set by OFTEL. Other operators are not subject to this price cap. However, BT are not able to price their services below cost as this would be anti-competitive. Average UK business and consumer telecommunications prices as a whole (combining standing charges and call charges on various tariffs) are below US, EU or OECD averages.

Electronic Commerce Support Centres (North-West)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the local electronic commerce support centres in the North-West; and how many small and medium enterprises use their services. [68462]

Mr. Wills: Information Society Initiative centres are based in the following TEC areas:

Bolton/Bury
Cumbria
ELTEC
Manchester
North and Mid Cheshire
Oldham
Rochdale
South and East Cheshire
Stockport and High Peak
Wigan
CEWTEC
St. Helens

The North West Technology Web also has a network of Technology Management Centres in:

Blackburn
Bolton
Daresbury
Manchester
Oldham
Preston
Skelmersdale
(A further centre is currently being set up in Cumbria)

Other centres which provide similar support to businesses include Connect in Liverpool, which covers Merseyside, and ISaware and Gemisis, which cover Greater Manchester.

Information on the number of companies using these centres will take time to compile and I will write to my hon. Friend and place a copy of that letter in the Libraries of the House.

Job Creation (Chorley)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will bring forward proposals for grants towards the creation for new jobs in the Chorley constituency. [68461]

Mr. Wills: The Government are currently reviewing the Assisted Areas Map. Following a public consultation last summer, it will make proposals to the European Commission for new Assisted Areas Map which will operate from 1 January 2000. No decisions have yet been made on the areas to be proposed. The Competitiveness White Paper announced a range of measures to improve competitiveness and create new jobs throughout the UK.

Indigenous Industries (Assistance)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has for assistance to indigenous industries located outside areas qualifying for regional selective assistance. [68460]

Mr. Wills: As announced in the Competitiveness White Paper, the Government are considering new measures to support the growth of smaller businesses in selected areas with particular needs. By working in partnership with the private sector to support the Enterprise Fund, the Government are also committed to ensuring that small businesses have access to appropriate funding.

Correspondence

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects to reply to the letter of 8 January from the hon. Member for Aylesbury about an export licence application of Aylesbury Automation Ltd. [68769]

Dr. Howells: The hon. Gentleman was sent a reply to his letter on 1 February.

Ex-miners (Compensation Scheme)

Dan Norris: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects the compensation scheme for ex-miners suffering from chronic bronchitis and emphysema to become operative. [68542]

Mr. Battle: We are close to agreeing with the plaintiffs' solicitors the arrangements for dealing with the 65,000 claims received to date and the further 35,000 claims expected. We are currently tendering for a national spirometry testing programme which we aim to start by the end of March. This should ensure that interim payments and, in some cases, full and final settlements, can begin to be offered to miners who are most severely disabled in the Spring. We hope that full examinations under the agreed Medical Assessment Process will commence in early Summer.

EU Code of Conduct (Arms Sales)

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what arrangements will be made to make available in the United Kingdom the annual report on the EU code of conduct on arms sales. [68110]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I have been asked to reply.

Member States have yet to decide whether the consolidated report to the Council on the operation of the Code should be made public. This is likely to depend on the content of the report, for example whether it contains information which Member States have agreed should remain confidential, such as details of individual licence refusals and consultations between Member States. Any changes to the Code as a result of the report will by definition be made public.

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to extend the principles of the EU code of conduct on arms exports to non-EU nations. [68106]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I have been asked to reply.

Following the adoption of the Code of Conduct in June 1998, the UK drew the Code to the attention of other arms exporting states and, in line with paragraph 11 of the operative provisions, encouraged them to subscribe to its principles. We understand that other EU Member States have taken similar action. The Associated Countries of Central and Eastern Europe and Cyprus have aligned themselves with the criteria in the Code of Conduct. The UK welcomes the decision of Canada to

subscribe to the principles and criteria developed in the Code of Conduct.

East Timor

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment the Minister has made of the allegations by the Defence Attaché to the Indonesian Embassy in London that British-made military equipment, including Saracen and Saladin armoured vehicles, are currently in use in occupied East Timor; and if he will make a statement. [67935]

Mr. Fatchett: I have been asked to reply.

I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave on 28 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *394*. Saracen and Saladin armoured vehicles were exported to Indonesia in the 1960s.

CABINET OFFICE

Ministerial Group on Older People

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office who is the Chair of the Ministerial Group on Older People; and if he will list the Group's full membership. [67246]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The Prime Minister has asked the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, my hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Mr. Timms), to take on the Chair of the Ministerial Group on Older People from Easter. The Minister of State, Department of Health is continuing to chair the Group until then.

Membership of the Group comprises those Ministers who have particular responsibilities for policy areas which affect older people. It includes the Minister for Women, and Ministers from the Department of Health, the Department of Social Security, the Cabinet Office, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the Home Office, HM Treasury, the Department of Trade and Industry, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the Department for Education and Employment, the Lord Chancellor's Department, the Ministry of Defence, the Northern Ireland Office, the Scottish Office and the Welsh Office.

Marsham Street

Mr. Leigh: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what further progress has been made on formulating plans for vacating the Marsham Street offices and demolishing them. [68316]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated under the terms of the Framework Document to Property Advisers to the Civil Estate. I have asked its Chief Executive, Mr. John Locke, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John C. Locke to Mr. Edward Leigh, dated 29 January 1999:

The Parliamentary Secretary for the Cabinet Office, Peter Kilfoyle, has asked me as Chief Executive of Property Advisers to the Civil Estate (PACE) to respond to your Parliamentary Question about further progress on the future of 2 Marsham Street as management responsibility for the building rests with this Agency.

As you are already aware, 2 Marsham Street is a Government freehold and until April last year was occupied by the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR). Since your earlier question on 10 June the building has remained vacant, save for the use of a limited part as a winter shelter for some of London's homeless. This Government initiative will end on 31 March, by which time a decision may well have been taken about the possible reuse of Marsham Street as temporary decant accommodation for another Government Department while its premises are refurbished. Such temporary re-use might last for 3 to 4 years. If re-use of the building cannot be justified in Exchequer terms, arrangements will be made to commence demolition.

PACE has already advertised the demolition contract through the Official Journal of the European Community (OJEC) and retains in its possession the expressions of interest that were received in response to the advertisement. Should Marsham Street remain unoccupied, PACE will review these expressions of interest together with all the other considerations related to the demolition of such a large building in a heavily built-up area like Westminster. On completion of the review, our intention would be to seek Ministerial approval to announce a start date for demolition. The work would be expected to take some 18 months following the letting of a contract.

Departmental Responsibilities

Mr. Maude: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what responsibilities which his Department had prior to the Comprehensive Spending Review are to be *(a)* discontinued by his Department, *(b)* transferred to another department, *(c)* transferred to an executive agency and *(d)* added to his Department over the period 1998–99 to 2001–02. [68394]

Mr. Kilfoyle: *(a)* The Security Facilities Division will be closed by 31 March 2001. *(b)* The Freedom of Information Unit transferred to the Home Office. *(c)* No responsibilities will be transferred to an executive agency. *(d)* The Women's Unit and Women's National Commission (NDPB) transferred from the Department of Social Security, UK Anti Drugs Co-ordination Unit from the Privy Council Office, and Head of Government Information & Communications Service from the Home Office. The Performance and Innovation Unit and the Centre for Management & Policy Studies have been newly established within the Department. The Royal Commission on House of Lords reform to be established in March 1999.

Departmental Legislation

Mr. Maude: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what additional legislation, not currently before Parliament, was assumed in the production of his Department's spending allocation for 1999–2000 to 2001–02 in the Comprehensive Spending Review. [68410]

Mr. Kilfoyle: There is a long-standing convention that legislative proposals for each year are not announced before the Queen's Speech at the start of the relevant Session.

Joint Consultative Committee

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he discussed working families tax credit with the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) as a policy which might be discussed by the Joint Consultative Committee. [68366]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: No.

HEALTH

Dental Care

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the forthcoming White Paper on Health is planned to be published; and if it will contain a section on dental care. [67108]

Ms Jowell: The "Our Healthier Nation" Green Paper included oral health in an indicative list of areas which

might be suitable for local health improvement targets to tackle health inequalities. The consultation asked how opinion on fluoridation could best be tested at local level. The forthcoming "Our Healthier Nation" White Paper will take full account of the responses to the consultation. We plan to publish the White Paper in the spring.

Neurology Services

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the specialist indicators which will be used to assess neurology services under the new NHS National Performance Framework. [66875]

Mr. Denham: "The New NHS Modern and Dependable: A National Framework for Assessing Performance" was published for consultation in January 1998 to signal our commitment to a broader based approach to assessing National Health Service performance. It included an initial set of high level performance indicators, which included two composite indicators in the "Effective Delivery of Appropriate Healthcare" area relevant to neurological services. The first was a chronic care management indicator including age and sex standardised admission rates for epilepsy. The second was a discharge from hospital indicator which included the rate of discharge home within 56 days of emergency admission from home with a stroke. Following consultation, the revised NHS performance assessment framework will be published shortly, together with a revised set of initial high level performance indicators. The high level performance indicators will continue to develop over time to ensure they focus on the outcomes that matter most to patients and the public.

Hospital Merger (Leicester)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what representations he has received on the proposed merger of NHS acute hospital trusts in Leicester; [66916]

(2) what assessment he has made of the impact *(a)* on public funds and *(b)* on health service provision of the proposed merger of hospital trusts in Leicester; and if he will make a statement; [66919]

(3) when he intends to start the consultation process on the proposed merger of acute hospital trusts in Leicester; who will be consulted; when he proposes to give his final approval for the proposal; and if he will make a statement. [67951]

Mr. Denham: When considering merger proposals the main factor must be the benefits any merger would bring to patients. Any proposal to merge National Health Service trusts will be expected to realise management cost savings of a minimum of £500,000 within two years. These savings would be retained locally for investment in frontline NHS services.

Ministers have not received direct representation on this issue. However, on 28 January 1999 I announced that a public consultation would be initiated on proposals to merge Glenfield Hospital NHS Trust, Leicester General Hospital NHS Trust and Leicester Royal Infirmary NHS Trust. The consultation will be carried out by NHS Executive Trent and will last from 22 February to 22 May. There is a formal requirement for the Department to consult with the Community Health Council but arrangements will also be made locally for the wider public to be invited to make their views known. Ministers will make a decision after the consultation has completed and all representations have been fully considered.

Correspondence

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reason the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health took 17 weeks to reply to the letter dated 9 September 1998 from the hon. Member for Christchurch about the continued availability of animal insulin for diabetics; and if he will make a statement. [67344]

Ms Jowell: I apologise to the hon. Member for the exceptional length of time taken to reply to his letter. Unfortunately it was misplaced within the Department. As soon as it came to light my noble Friend the Under-Secretary replied immediately.

Organophosphate Poisoning

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what procedures are in place to inform doctors of the symptoms of organophosphate exposure; [67123]

(2) what measures his Department has taken to educate doctors regarding the recognition and treatment of chronic organophosphate poisoning. [67121]

Ms Jowell: The Chief Medical Officer wrote to all doctors in England in 1991, and again with the Chief Executive of the Veterinary Medicines Directorate in June 1993, to alert doctors to the possibility of adverse effects from exposure to pesticides and certain veterinary medicines and to remind them of the reporting schemes for human adverse reactions to veterinary products operated by the Employment Medical Advisory Service and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food's Veterinary Medicines Directive. The Chief Medical Officers in Scotland, in Wales and in Northern Ireland also wrote to doctors in those countries.

An article in the October 1995 edition of Chief Medical Officer's Update, a quarterly publication sent to all doctors in England, dealt with both the acute and chronic effects of organophosphates (OPs) and the methods for reporting adverse reactions to them.

A further article, in the April 1996 edition of Update (England only) informed all doctors of the publication, in the same month, of the new edition of the book "Pesticide Poisoning: Notes for the Guidance of Medical Practitioners". This book contains a section on the acute and chronic toxic effects of OP insecticides and was sent by all United Kingdom Health Departments to general practices, accident and emergency departments and consultants in communicable disease control (and equivalents) with a covering letter.

Copies of this book were also sent to the presidents of the Royal Colleges (Royal College of Physicians, Royal

College of Surgeons, Royal College of Anaesthetists, Royal College of General Practitioners, Royal College of Pathologists, Faculty of Public Health Medicine and Faculty of Occupational Medicine) under cover of an explanatory letter which encouraged them to draw the book to the attention of their Fellows/Members through their continuing medical education programmes.

Copies of the book "Pesticide Poisoning: Notes for the Guidance of Medical Practitioners" are available in the Library.

A report of a joint working party of the Royal College of Physicians of London and the Royal College of Psychiatrists set up at the invitation of the Department to advise on clinical aspects of long-term low-dose exposure to OP sheep dips was published in November 1998. An article in the February 1999 edition of the CMO's Update will draw doctors' attention to the report and the recommendations it contains on diagnosis and management of patients.

Over the coming months, we will also be discussing with other bodies such as the National Poisons Information Service, the working party's recommendations for improving awareness amongst general practitioners and other measures which might improve aspects of the diagnosis and management of this group of patients.

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list those NHS trusts in Britain which offer specialist treatment to patients suffering from chronic fatigue syndrome. [67008]

Ms Jowell: The information is not available in the form requested. The organisation of health services, including services for people suffering from chronic fatigue syndrome/myalgic encephalomyelitis, and the manner in which they are delivered, are matters for National Health Service trusts and health authorities, taking account of the needs of the local population and the priorities set for the use of the available resources.

Orthopaedic Consultants

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the ratio of orthopaedic consultants to *(a)* adults and *(b)* pensioners in each health authority. [67000]

Mr. Denham: Copies of a table showing the latest available information on the ratio of orthopaedic consultants to *(a)* adults and *(b)* pensioners in each health authority will be placed in the Library.

Ongar War Memorial Hospital

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will announce his decision on the proposed closure of Ongar War Memorial Hospital. [67640]

Mr. Denham: A decision on the proposed closure of Ongar War Memorial Hospital will be announced shortly.

Winter Pressures Money

Mr. Syms: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much extra money was put into the NHS to help deal with the 1998–99 winter pressures; when this money was made available; and what it was spent on. [67375]

Mr. Denham: An extra £250 million (£209 million for England) was announced in November to help the National Health Service and social services manage this winter's pressures, £159 million of which was made available immediately in England. £50 million was held as a central contingency fund, £44 million of which has been allocated in January to relieve particular pressure points.

The additional moneys have funded well over 2,000 projects to manage emergency admissions and maximise bed availability, including many joint NHS/social service schemes aimed at providing appropriate support for patients in the community.

Aricept

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what evaluation he has made of the clinical trials regarding the use of Aricept in treating patients suffering from Alzheimer's disease. [67993]

Mr. Hutton: Information regarding the use of Aricept in patients suffering from Alzheimer's disease from clinical trials has been considered by the Medicines Control Agency.

The Standing Medical Advisory Committee, which advises health ministers, also considered available evidence from clinical trials and has reflected these in the clinical statement issued in April 1998.

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health under what circumstances the drug Aricept is currently available by prescription for the treatment of Alzheimer's disease. [67992]

Mr. Denham: Aricept (donepezil) is licensed in the United Kingdom for the treatment of mild to moderate Alzheimer's disease, and can be prescribed by doctors on the National Health Service. The Standing Medical Advisory Committee has recommended that this treatment should be initiated only following a specialist assessment.

Practice Dispensing

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when arrangements were introduced through which general practitioners may earn additional income related to the volume and costs of drugs they dispense. [68448]

Mr. Denham: Payments to general practitioners in respect of practice dispensing have included arrangements to reflect the volume and cost of the drugs since the inception of the National Health Service.

The level of fees and allowances payable to GPs are set by the independent pay review body to deliver and distribute their recommended level of net incomes for GPs, taking account of the costs, pressures and workload of practice in different areas. Earnings from practice dispensing are an integral part of the overall recommendations of the review body.

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of GPs dispense drugs. [68443]

Mr. Denham: Based on October 1997 data, some 16 per cent. of general practitioners in England are dispensing doctors.

Dental Services

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how much was spent on NHS general dental services in each health authority in each year since 1995–96; [67260]

(2) if he will list, by health authority, the number of dentists with an NHS list and the average number of patients on each dentist's NHS list for (i) the most recent period for which data are available, (ii) March 1994 and (iii) March 1997; [67261]

(3) if he will list by health authority or council area the number of (i) children and (ii) adults registered, and the number of patients registered per 100 residents for *(a)* the last date for which figures are available, *(b)* March 1995, *(c)* March 1996, *(d)* March 1997 and *(e)* March 1998. [67262]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 28 January 1999]:* Copies of the information requested have been placed in the Library. Data are not directly comparable from year to year because of health authority boundary changes.

Residential Care

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will respond to the report of the Centre for Policy on Ageing on National Required Standards for Residential Care and Nursing Homes; and if he will provide an estimate of the costs of compliance. [68222]

Mr. Hutton: The Centre for Policy on Ageing submitted their report on national standards for older people in residential care only very recently. We intend to publish the proposed standards for consultation shortly. Following consultation, we will consider the cost implications of introducing the standards prior to taking any decision about their implementation.

Beta-interferon

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will specify the unanswered questions about the appropriate use of beta-interferon referred to in his answer of 17 November, *Official Report*, columns *566–67*, on which his Department is commissioning new research. [68429]

Mr. Hutton: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett) on 26 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *211*.

A range of research questions are under consideration, broadly relating to the long-term clinical effectiveness of beta-interferon and its cost effectiveness relative to other treatments for multiple sclerosis.

Nurses' Uniforms

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the charging of nurses for their uniforms by colleges. [68465]

Mr. Denham: Uniforms are provided free of charge to nursing students. They are provided either by the local National Health Service trust or by the higher education institution; in the latter case, the costs are met through NHS contracts. A case came to our attention last week where a university was seeking to charge for nurses' uniforms, in a way not sanctioned by their contract. As soon as we heard about the proposal we asked officials to investigate and the university concerned has now withdrawn its proposal. NHS education commissioners have been reminded of the policy in this area.

Pay Review Body Recommendations

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the reports and recommendations of the Health Pay Review bodies. [68859]

Mr. Dobson: I am responding on behalf of my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Wales and the Secretary of State for Scotland to the reports of the Review Body on Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration (DDRB) and the Review Body on Nursing Staff, Midwives, Health Visitors and Professions Allied to Medicine (NPRB), which have been published today. Copies are available in the Vote Office and the Library. I am grateful to the chairmen and members of these Review Bodies for their hard work.

Nurses are to get their biggest real terms increase for 10 years, and for the first time in 5 years the award is being paid nationally in full with no staging. The NPRB have recommended an across the board increase of 4.7 per cent. for nurses, midwives and health visitors. Around 70,000 D grade staff nurses will receive 8.2 per cent.-8.4 per cent., worth an extra £1,100-£1,200 a year. In addition, minimum starting pay for newly qualified nurses will rise to £14,400, an increase of 12 per cent. In inner London starting pay for a newly qualified nurse will be at least £17,325 including London Allowance. The guaranteed London Allowance affecting 50,000 nurses will increase by 15.4 per cent. On top of these pay increases, almost half of all nurses will receive pay increments worth at least a further 3.4 per cent. With these increases, more than two thirds of qualified nurses will earn £20,000 or more per year.

The NPRB have also recommended an across the board increase of 4.7 per cent. for physiotherapists, radiographers and other professions allied to medicine (PAMs). Starting pay for basic grade PAMs with a degree after four years' training will increase on 1 April from £14,180 to £15,405, a rise of 8.6 per cent., with similar rises for other basic grade PAMs. The maximum of scale for highly skilled Senior 1 grade PAMs will increase from £21,485 to £23,130 from 1 April, a rise of 7.7 per cent.

The Government have decided to accept all the NPRB pay recommendations for 1999–2000, with no staging. The headline settlement of 4.7 per cent. for nurses and other NPRB staff groups is significantly higher than for any of the other Review Body groups announced today, and more than we would expect for pay settlements in the public sector generally or elsewhere in the National Health Service. However, this is justified by the exceptional problems of nurse recruitment and retention which result from the failure of the last Government to put in place an adequate training and pay system for the

profession. We are pleased that the NPRB have recommended an exceptional increase for an exceptional problem.

The Doctors' and Dentists' Review Body (DDRB) has recommended a general pay increase of 3.5 per cent. for salaried doctors and dentists and for the pay element of fees for general medical practitioners. General practitioners will also receive the £60 million additional income recommended by DDRB last year for payment from 1999–2000. General dental practitioners' fees will also increase by 3.5 per cent. once the 0.9 per cent. addition to the feescale, awarded in 1998–99 only, has been removed. The DDRB has also recommended an additional £500 per year on the consultant scale maximum. The Government have accepted these recommendations for the coming year in full, with no staging.

The DDRB also recommended an extra £50 million a year from 2000–2001 to reward individual consultants for increases in workload and intensity of work. Our negotiations with the profession on a new consultant contract are covering these issues. We will consider this recommendation very carefully in the context of the negotiations, and are willing to make an investment in rewards and incentives if the negotiations deliver a better service for patients. We will, therefore, decide on the level of any extra funding for future years, and how such funding might be allocated, when the negotiations are complete.

Health authorities and NHS trusts can now use these opportunities to support a modern approach to recruiting, retaining and motivating key staff. I can announce today we are backing this with an allocation from the Modernisation Fund of £100m already earmarked for staff, which will go to all health authorities in England. This is in addition to the 6.5 per cent. increase in allocations to health authorities; and it will not affect the sums already announced within the Modernisation Fund for waiting lists, capital, mental health, primary care and information technology which already come to almost £1 billion for the coming year. The pay increases are therefore affordable both nationally and locally.

This extra funding will help us get the nurses and other staff in place to take forward effectively the Government's programme for modernising the NHS. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland will be releasing an additional £20m to Health Boards from his Modernisation Programme. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales is making £6m available as a contribution to modernising the service including recruitment and retention initiatives.

In its evidence to the Nursing Pay Review Body, the Department drew attention to recruitment and retention concerns and asked for changes to address this by starting to modernise the nursing pay scales. The Review Body has responded by improving starting pay for nurses, as well as continuing the discretionary points for staff at the top of pay scales.

We are supporting local recruitment plans with a high-profile, recruitment campaign for nurses which starts tonight on television. The aim is to attract more people into nursing and encourage qualified nurses and midwives to come back to work in the NHS. The focus of the campaign is on the value and rewards of a career in nursing and is intended to help recruit the extra nurses and midwives the NHS needs. The TV campaign will run for a month, backed by activity through to March in the national and regional press, in magazines and on radio.

These settlements are fair and are being paid in full. They provide a platform for us to move forward on pay modernisation. We will publish detailed proposals for modernising the NHS pay system shortly. The kind of pay system needed in a modern NHS will:

- enable staff to give their best for patients, working in new ways and breaking down traditional barriers
- get away from the rigid and outdated grading structures which restrict career progression for experienced staff
- pay fairly and equitably for work done, with career progression based on responsibility, competence and satisfactory performance
- simplify and modernise conditions of service, with national core conditions and appropriate local flexibility.

These changes are crucial to the modernisation of the NHS. They respond directly to concerns expressed by the Review Bodies, and are the only realistic way to satisfy nurses' aspirations for fewer pay ceilings and better reward for the job done. They provide the essential background for future investment in pay and staff development.

Health Authority Funding (West Midlands)

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list for each health authority in *(a)* the West Midlands and *(b)* shire counties (i) the total funding allocation for health services and (ii) the funding per capita for (1) 1996–97 and (2) 1997–98. [68332]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is shown in the table.

For the per capita figures crude populations have been used. No account has been taken of the differences in age or other factors which influence the allocations which have been made.

Health authority	*1996–97 final cash limit £000*	*Population 000s*	*1996–97 funding per capita £*
West Midlands			
Birmingham Health Authority	560,714	1,008	556
Coventry Health Authority	156,033	300	520
Dudley Health Authority	139,518	314	444
Herefordshire Health Authority	80,943	166	488
North Staffordshire Health Authority	242,022	476	508
Sandwell Health Authority	167,687	293	572
Shropshire Health Authority	189,099	424	446
Solihull Health Authority	107,132	201	533
South Staffordshire Health Authority	269,486	587	459

Health authority	1996–97 final cash limit £000	Population 000s	1996–97 funding per capita £
Walsall Health Authority	126,240	264	478
Warwickshire Health Authority	278,731	499	559
Wolverhampton Health Authority	122,502	244	502
Worcester Health Authority	254,061	542	469
Other			
Avon Health Authority	481,077	982	490
Bedfordshire Health Authority	238,995	550	435
Berkshire Health Authority	344,651	779	442
Buckinghamshire Health Authority	299,560	674	444
Cambridge and Huntingdon Health Authority	193,472	459	422
Cornwall and Isle of Scilly Health Authority	244,556	489	500
County Durham Health Authority	322,967	609	530
Dorset Health Authority	348,685	683	511
East and North Hertfordshire Health Authority	240,453	490	491
East Lancashire Health Authority	270,795	513	528
East Kent Health Authority	314,507	590	533
East Norfolk Health Authority	309,456	621	498
East Riding Health Authority	288,988	577	497
East Surrey Health Authority	231,620	410	565
East Sussex, Brighton and Hove Health Authority	398,045	728	547
Gloucestershire Health Authority	261,482	554	472
Isle of Wight Health Authority	78,676	125	629
Leicestershire Health Authority	427,267	927	461
Lincolnshire Health Authority	309,385	616	502
Morecambe Bay Health Authority	166,678	311	536
North West Lancashire Health Authority	262,151	468	560
North and East Devon Health Authority	244,502	473	517
North and Mid Hampshire Health Authority	242,913	546	445
North Cheshire Health Authority	158,330	310	511
North Cumbria Health Authority	156,289	319	490
North Derbyshire Health Authority	189,999	377	504
North Essex Health Authority	399,569	875	457
North Nottinghamshire Health Authority	182,067	392	464
North West Anglia Health Authority	190,711	411	464
North Yorkshire Health Authority	350,923	737	476
Northamptonshire Health Authority	273,675	608	450
Northumberland Health Authority	164,590	311	529
Oxfordshire Health Authority	263,933	603	438
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire Health Authority	242,890	533	456
South Lancashire Health Authority	148,081	312	475
Somerset Health Authority	228,424	485	471
South Cheshire Health Authority	324,095	672	482
South and West Devon Health Authority	300,913	592	508
South Derbyshire Health Authority	279,009	554	504
South Essex Health Authority	320,552	701	457
South Humber Health Authority	157,602	317	497
Southhampton and South West Hampshire Health Authority	256,688	533	482
Suffolk Health Authority	299,969	663	452
Tees Health Authority	278,354	558	499
West Hertfordshire Health Authority	268,209	518	518
West Kent Health Authority	457,217	964	474

Health authority	1997–98 final cash limit £000	Population 000s	1997–98 funding per capita £
West Midlands			
Birmingham Health Authority	583,936	1,016	575
Coventry Health Authority	170,088	301	565
Dudley Health Authority	149,339	314	476
Herefordshire Health Authority	88,607	166	534
North Staffordshire Health Authority	262,359	475	552
Sandwell Health Authority	180,831	293	617
Shropshire Health Authority	202,587	427	474
Solihull Health Authority	111,409	203	549
South Staffordshire Health Authority	283,562	588	482
Walsall Health Authority	136,755	263	520

Health authority	1997–98 final cash limit £000	Population 000s	1997–98 funding per capita £
Warwickshire Health Authority	286,325	502	570
Wolverhampton Health Authority	131,887	243	543
Worcester Health Authority	268,004	537	499
Other			
Avon Health Authority	514,405	989	520
Bedfordshire Health Authority	251,206	552	455
Berkshire Health Authority	373,403	794	470
Buckinghamshire Health Authority	316,000	681	464
Cambridge and Huntingdon Health Authority	202,555	456	444
Cornwall and Isle of Scilly Health Authority	256,486	490	523
County Durham Health Authority	335,707	609	551
Dorset Health Authority	376,612	690	546
East and North Hertfordshire Health Authority	256,160	495	517
East Lancashire Health Authority	292,617	512	572
East Kent Health Authority	331,487	595	557
East Norfolk Health Authority	324,385	624	520
East Riding Health Authority	302,002	582	519
East Surrey Health Authority	245,548	412	596
East Sussex, Brighton and Hove Health Authority	429,400	735	584
Gloucestershire Health Authority	276,951	560	495
Isle of Wight Health Authority	81,035	126	643
Leicestershire Health Authority	454,262	934	486
Lincolnshire Health Authority	328,866	622	529
Morecambe Bay Health Authority	181,637	311	584
North West Lancashire Health Authority	270,973	470	577
North and East Devon Health Authority	258,273	476	543
North and Mid Hampshire Health Authority	255,126	549	465
North Cheshire Health Authority	167,563	312	537
North Cumbria Health Authority	167,232	319	524
North Derbyshire Health Authority	198,239	376	527
North Essex Health Authority	424,367	885	480
North Nottinghamshire Health Authority	195,658	389	503
North West Anglia Health Authority	203,836	413	494
North Yorkshire Health Authority	372,067	741	502
Northamptonshire Health Authority	291,851	610	478
Northumberland Health Authority	174,657	310	563
Oxfordshire Health Authority	280,849	609	461
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire Health Authority	259,543	538	482
South Lancashire Health Authority	158,068	311	508
Somerset Health Authority	242,363	488	497
South Cheshire Health Authority	339,310	674	503
South and West Devon Health Authority	318,677	594	536
South Derbyshire Health Authority	294,228	559	526
South Essex Health Authority	348,101	704	494
South Humber Health Authority	172,232	313	550
Southhampton and South West Hampshire Health Authority	282,569	541	522
Suffolk Health Authority	317,614	667	476
Tees Health Authority	301,712	534	565
West Hertfordshire Health Authority	284,245	525	541
West Kent Health Authority	477,088	967	493

Notes:
1. Final cash limit is the sum of the initial cash limit plus all in year adjustments. Cash limit adjustments in respect of the temporary loan of cash limits to other authorities have been excluded.
2. Health authorities are not co-terminous with local authorities. The list of health authorities under "other" is intended to broadly equate to shire counties. It excludes health authorities whose areas mainly relate to metropolitan councils and London boroughs.
3. The 1996–97 population figures used are mid-year population projections based on 1993 estimates. The 1997–98 population figures used are mid-year population projections based on 1995 estimates.

Stereotactic Radiosurgery

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which health authorities fund the use of stereotactic radiosurgery; and what constraints are imposed by him in respect of the funding of clinical procedures capable of being classified as in the realms of research. [67709]

Mr. Hutton: Stereotactic radiosurgery is available in eight of some fifty radiotherapy centres in the United Kingdom. The technique is well established for certain well-defined conditions which would be expected to occur in patients spread fairly evenly across all health authorities. Health authorities make resource allocation decisions according to local priorities.

We encourage National Health Service bodies to undertake experimental treatments only within an evaluative framework. Any decisions to fund experimental treatments as research will be influenced by their importance to the health service and assessments on the value of the research.

WALES

GPs

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many general practitioners were registered in Wales in May 1997; and how many are currently registered in Wales. [68456]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Data on numbers of general medical practitioners were collected on a six monthly basis (as at 1 April and 1 October) until 1 October 1997 after which only annual data (at 1 October) are being collected.

At 1 April 1997 there were 1,840 general medical practitioners in Wales, of which 1,740 were unrestricted principals. By 1 October 1997 the figures had risen to 1,874 and 1,753 respectively.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

General Pinochet

Mr. Wareing: To ask the Attorney-General what representations he has received in respect of possible private prosecutions being taken out against General Pinochet; what his response has been; and if he will make a statement. [67970]

The Attorney-General: On 26 October 1998, I received an application from Winstanley-Burgess, Solicitors, acting for a number of individuals who complained of acts of torture in Chile in the period 1973–1990. The application was of Law Officer consent to prosecute Augusto Pinochet for offices of torture contrary to section 134 Criminal Justice Act 1988. By letter dated 28 October 1998, Winstanley-Burgess were advised that I had considered their application and had declined to grant consent on the basis that the application revealed insufficient admissible evidence for there to be a realistic prospect of a conviction.

On 26 October 1998, I received an application from Bindman & Partners, Solicitors, acting for a number of individuals who alleged that they had suffered criminal offences in Chile at a time when Augusto Pinochet was in power. The application was for Law Officer consent to prosecute Augusto Pinochet for offences of torture, contrary to section 134 Criminal Justice Act 1988, and for hostage taking, contrary to the Taking of Hostages Act 1982. By letter dated 28 October 1998 Bindman & Partners were advised that I had considered their application and had declined to grant consent on the basis that the application revealed insufficient admissible evidence for there to be a realistic prospect of a conviction.

Bindman & Partners have on a number of occasions renewed their application for Law Officer consent to prosecute Augusto Pinochet with further material. To date, their applications have been declined on the same basis as before. Their latest application is under consideration.

Individuals have communicated with me and my office concerning a prosecution of Augusto Pinochet in this jurisdiction. Replies have been limited to factual explanations of the decision making process and the state of any application for Law Officer consent to a prosecution.

Councillor Frank MacGrath

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Attorney-General what was the cost to the public purse of the conduct and arrangement of proceedings in the case of Councillor Frank MacGrath of Preston. [66332]

The Attorney-General *[holding answer 20 January 1999]:* Councillor Frank MacGrath was the subject of three separate sets of criminal proceedings which arose out of an investigation by the Lancashire Constabulary known as Operation Angel involving allegations of fraud and corruption. Expenditure identified by the CPS as attributable to this series of cases comprises Counsel's fees £250,134 and payments in relation to witness expenses of £2,496. However, the complexity and inter-relationship of these cases make it impossible to attribute specific expenditure to Councillor MacGrath. The CPS staff working on the case did so as part of their ordinary department duties and their salary and associated cost cannot be separately apportioned.

I understand from the Lord Chancellor's Department that information about the passage of the case through the magistrates court is held only in manual records and therefore is not readily available. It could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

I am further informed by the Lord Chancellor's Department that, according to information readily available, Frank MacGrath was granted legal aid in the Crown Court and the total amount paid to defence lawyers was £120,936.46. In addition, there were payments amounting to £47,153.88 from Central funds. Just over 71 hours were spent in Crown Court hearings and this cost an estimated £21,200.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Aspartame

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what research his Department has commissioned into the possible *(a)* health dangers and *(b)* side-effects of Aspartame; [66678]

(2) what assessment he has made of the health risks posed by Aspartame. [66677]

Ms Jowell: The Department has not commissioned any research in this area. However, the Department regularly reviews new information on food chemical safety and, when appropriate, seeks advice from its expert advisory committees. In 1992 the Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment (COT) completed a thorough review of the toxicity of aspartame and reaffirmed its earlier advice that aspartame was safe to use. The COT also considered reports linking aspartame with a variety of adverse effects such as headache, seizures and behavioural difficulties in children. There was insufficient evidence to support such claims. Aspartame has also been given safety clearance

by the European Commission's Scientific Committee for Food. A study published in 1996 which suggested a link between aspartame and brain cancer was rejected by the Committee on Carcinogenicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment.

Food Standards Agency

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the expected cost of *(a)* setting up and *(b)* annually operating the Food Standards Agency; and if he will make a statement. [67713]

Mr. Rooker: Setting up the FSA is expected to involve additional one-off costs of around £12 million per annum over three years and additional ongoing costs of about £29 million per annum, taking account of the collection costs associated with the proposed levy. In addition, current food safety and standards functions, and their associated expenditure, will transfer to the Food Standards Agency from MAFF, DH, and the devolved administrations.

Slaughterhouse Closures

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many slaughterhouse premises have closed in the last 12 months; and what effect this has had on reducing journey times of livestock to slaughter within the UK. [67872]

Mr. Rooker: During 1998, 28 slaughterhouse licences (red meat and poultry meat) were revoked because they had ceased operating. The effect on journey times will vary according to the location of the farm of origin and the nearest slaughterhouse. Whilst we would prefer animals to be slaughtered close to the farm, this may not occur for a variety of reasons. Legislation lays down clear rules to protect the welfare of animals during transport, and there is no reason why animals should not be transported safely and humanely.

Enrofloxacin

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent representations he has received in support of a ban on the use of enrofloxacin in animals. [67741]

Mr. Rooker: None. However, the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee, in its report of 17 March 1998 "Resistance to Antibiotics and other Antimicrobial Agents", recommended extreme economy of use of fluoroquinolones in veterinary practice (recommendation 11.21). The report also recommended the development of a Code of Practice on when such compounds should be prescribed. The Government accept this recommendation and their response to the report is available in the Library of the House.

Genetically Engineered Crops

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the *(a)* nutritional need for and *(b)* alternatives to the production of genetically engineered crops in the United Kingdom. [67660]

Mr. Rooker: Genetically modified crops will not be grown until they have passed all the relevant statutory procedures. Once they have done so, it will be for the market to determine whether they provide nutritional or other benefits over alternative varieties.

Research Projects

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will assess the capability of the length of time for which *(a)* agricultural, *(b)* agroforestry and *(c)* horticultural research projects are funded by his Department with the biological systems which they are designed to assess; and if he will assess the benefits of more long term research funding in respect of the longer rotations in organic systems. [67661]

Mr. Rooker: Research is funded for an appropriate length of time bearing in mind the particular biological and agricultural systems being investigated. However, in many cases it is not appropriate to let an individual contract which covers the whole period of the research. Instead, the research is funded by a number of consecutive contracts. This assists the management of the research and allows changes of priorities and redirection during the course of the work. This holds for all of the Ministry's agricultural research including that on organic systems.

Sustainable Agriculture

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list those *(a)* persons and *(b)* organisations who submitted responses to his Department's consultation on indicators for sustainable agriculture; and if he will make a statement. [67662]

Mr. Rooker: A list of the individuals and organisations who responded to my Department's consultation on a set of indicators for sustainable agriculture follows. Copies of the responses are available in the MAAF Main Library. These indicators are intended to complement the wider set of indicators on sustainable development for the UK which is being developed by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. The aim is to publish the agriculture indicators as a pilot set later this year, and to develop them further over the next three to five years.

Respondents to the MAFF consultation on the development of a set of indicators for sustainable agriculture (June-September 1998)

Individuals

Ms Margareta Jose-Baars

Mr. Marcus Braun

Mr. Peter F. Hepworth

Mr. O. H. A. Dowding

Institution/Organisation

ACTIN

ADAS Consulting Ltd.

Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers

British Agrochemicals Association Limited

British Government Panel on Sustainable Development

British Pest Control Association

British Society of Soil Science

Butterfly Conservation

Central Scotland Countryside Trust

Centre for Ecology and Hydrology

Cheshire County Council
Consumers in Europe
Consumers' Association
Council for British Archaeology
Council for the Protection of Rural England
Country Landowners' Association
Countryside Commission
Countryside Council for Wales
Cranfield University, Soil Survey and Land Research Centre
Crofters Commission
Dartmoor National Park Authority
Elm Farm Research Centre
English Heritage
English Nature
Environment Agency
Farmers' Union of Wales
Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group
Fertiliser Manufacturers Association Ltd.
Friends of the Earth
Game Conservation Trust
Green Adventure
Historic Farm Buildings Group
Institute of Arable Crops Research
Institute of Grassland and Environmental Research
Institute of Professional Soil Scientists
Institute of Virology and Environmental Microbiology
Isle of Man Government, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forests
Local Government Association
National Consumer Council
National Farmers' Union
National Federation of Consumer Groups
National Trust
Natural Environment Research Council
North York Moors National Park Authority (on behalf of the Association of National Park Authorities)
Northern Ireland Environmental Link
Pesticides Trust
Plantlife
Royal Agricultural Society of England
Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors
Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
Royal Town Planning Institute
Royal Welsh Agricultural Society Ltd.
Rural Development Commission
Rural, Agriculture and Allied Workers, TGWU
SAFE Alliance
Scottish Agricultural College
Scottish Environmental Protection Agency
Scottish Landowners' Federation
Scottish Natural Heritage
Soil Association
Suffolk ACRE
Tenant Farmers' Association
Thames Water
UKASTA Ltd.
Ulster Wildlife Trust
University of Hertfordshire
Watling Chase Community Forest (on behalf of Community Forests)
Welsh Local Government Association
Women's Farming Union
Yorkshire Water.

Orchards

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to increase the acreage of orchards in England. [68050]

Mr. Rooker: Decisions on the area to be cultivated are taken by growers in response to the needs of the market.

Meat Inspection

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food by what date the UK will be in full compliance with EU rules on meat inspection. [68128]

Mr. Rooker: Full compliance with EU rules on veterinary supervision in licensed meat plants in Great Britain is not possible in the short term, essentially because of a shortage of veterinarians willing to undertake meat hygiene work in the UK. It is not known how long it will take to achieve full compliance, as this will depend on the Meat Hygiene Service's ability to secure the services of additional Official Veterinary Surgeons, and on future changes in the size and structure of the meat industry. Therefore, it may be some years before the levels and frequency of veterinary supervision required by the EU meat hygiene Directives are achieved in all GB licensed meat plants.

Abattoirs

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many abattoirs continue to operate under derogation for low throughput. [68130]

Mr. Rooker: At 1 January 1999, there were 210 permanently derogated (low throughput) slaughterhouses in England licensed to produce meat for sale for human consumption. Of these, 162 were red meat slaughterhouses and 48 were poultry slaughterhouses.

Pork Imports

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to introduce compulsory labelling for imported pork products which do not meet UK welfare, veterinary and feed standards. [68143]

Mr. Rooker: None; but I welcome the initiatives taken by many retailers to introduce voluntary labelling schemes giving consumers more information about rearing standards. My right hon. Friend the Minister has received assurances from the major supermarkets that all their own label fresh pork, bacon, ham, sausages and pork pies will come from stall and tether and meat and bone meal free production systems; also, they will not label as British processed products produced from imported fresh port.

I am sure the launch earlier this month by the Meat and Livestock Commission of the quality pigmark scheme will help consumers to identify pigmeat products in the shops which have been produced to British standards.

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will estimate the annual tonnage of pork meat products entering the UK; and what estimate he has of the percentage of this imported meat which is produced from animals that would not meet UK *(a)* welfare, *(b)* veterinary and *(c)* feed regulation standards. [68142]

Mr. Rooker: In the five years 1994–98, the UK imported around 160,000 tonnes of pork on average every year from other EU member states (imports from third countries are minimal). All would have met EU welfare, veterinary and feed requirements. Since March 1996, the UK has not permitted mammalian meat and bone meal to be fed to farm animals, a ban which is not in place in all member states. Also, since 1 January 1999, the UK has had a ban on housing pigs in close confinement stall and tether systems; although it is impossible to say what proportion of imported pork has not met these production standards since their introduction, it is likely to be very small.

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what statutory provisions prevent the introduction of a ban on the import of pork products where the pork does not meet UK welfare, veterinary and feed regulation standards. [68161]

Mr. Rooker: Single Market Legislation and European Court of Justice Rulings protect the free circulation of goods in the EU. In areas where there is a common market, such as pigmeat, if products conform to EU requirements, individual member states cannot introduce a unilateral ban. In respect of third country trade, the World Trade Organisation Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures gives WTO members the right to take measures necessary for the protection of human, animal or plant life or health, provided that these are based on scientific principles and are not maintained without sufficient scientific evidence.

Welsh and English Lamb

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to assist Welsh and English lamb producers in meeting the demand for bulk food supplies. [68596]

Mr. Rooker: If there is a demand for bulk supplies of lamb, then it is surely a matter for the industry to find a means of supplying that demand.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 2 February 1999

DEFENCE

Air Squadrons

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the location of the University of London and Cambridge University Air Squadrons. [69144]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The basing of Cambridge University Air Squadron and the collocated No. 5 Air Cadet Air Experience Flight, at Cambridge Airport, has been the subject of review to determine whether their operations could be undertaken more effectively at another location. At the same time it has been necessary to identify a new location for the University of London Air Squadron and part of the No. 6 Air Cadet Air Experience Flight task, due to increased helicopter operations at RAF Benson, their current location.

RAF Wyton has been identified as the most cost-effective and operationally suitable location for the two Squadrons and the Air Experience Flights. On current plans the transfer of these units will commence in September 1999.

Infra-red Technology

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what investment his Department has made in infra-red technology for use in *(a)* the defence industry and *(b)* elsewhere in each of the last 10 years. [66661]

Mr. Spellar: Infra-red technology has a wide spectrum of defence applications, and information on the totality of expenditure specifically involving this technology is not available.

Service Personnel (Northern Ireland)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the aggregate total of British service personnel, including members of the Ulster Defence Regiment and RIR, who have served at least one tour of duty or have been employed for six months or more in Northern Ireland since August 1969; and how many service personnel have *(a)* lost their lives and *(b)* been injured in connection with their military duties and responsibilities in Northern Ireland. [67427]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Since August 1969, the total number of soldiers who have served or are currently serving in Northern Ireland for six months or more is 152,769. The total number of officers who have served or are currently serving in Northern Ireland is 25,098. The latter figure contains tour lengths of three to four months as well as those of six months or more.

The number of service personnel who have lost their lives since August 1969 in connection with their military duties and responsibilities in Northern Ireland is detailed in the table.

	Number
Army[1]	651
RN[2]	11
RAF[2]	4

The number of British service personnel injured in Northern Ireland since August 1969 is detailed in the table.

	Number
Army[3]	6,076
RN[4]	163
RAF[4]	143

[1] Figures are from August 1969 to 31 December 1998 and relate to terrorist activity.

[2] Figures are from 1 January 1974 to 31 December 1998 and include injuries/deaths from all causes.

[3] Figures are from August 1969 to 31 December 1998 and relate primarily to injuries which were incurred whilst on duty; however, the manner in which data have historically been compiled means some injuries incurred whilst off duty may also be included.

[4] Figures are from 1 January 1976 to 31 December 1998 and relate primarily to injuries which were incurred whilst on duty; however, the manner in which data have historically been compiled means some injuries incurred whilst off duty may also be included.

Iraq

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he has made of the number of civilian casualties in Iraq caused by military action since the conclusion of Operation Desert Fox. [68352]

Mr. George Robertson: We believe that the only military action since the conclusion of Operation Desert Fox which could have caused civilian casualties was an incident on 25 January. Coalition aircraft patrolling the Iraqi Southern No-Fly-Zone in accordance with their humanitarian mission encountered four Iraqi MIGs who were attempting to draw them into a pre-arranged Surface to Air Missile (SAM) trap and were fired at by Iraqi anti-aircraft artillery. US aircraft responded by attacking a SAM site and related air defence and communications systems north of Basra. The US has confirmed that a rocket propelled bomb went astray and landed in a residential district several kilometres from its target. It could have caused civilian casualties, but the US is still investigating and cannot confirm. I deeply regret any civilian casualties but must stress that the US acted in self-defence responding to a serious and immediate threat to the safety of coalition aircraft.

Aer Lingus Crash

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library the documentation held by his Department on the crash of the Aer Lingus Viscount in the Irish sea on 24 March 1968, and the subsequent search and rescue operation; and if he will make this material available to the Irish Government. [67434]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Copies of the UK report on the initial surface search and rescue operation for the Aer Lingus Viscount 712, and on the subsequent sea bed search and salvage operation undertaken at the request of the Irish Government, were placed in the Library of the House and given to the Irish Government in September 1998.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the naval vessels engaged in search operations for the wreckage of the Aer Lingus Viscount in the Irish sea from 24 March 1968 until the search was abandoned and in each case the dates on which searches took place; how many bodies were *(a)* recovered and *(b)* identified; where the wreckage was taken to be examined; and where the wreckage is currently stored. [67437]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Details of British naval involvement in the search operation for the Aer Lingus wreckage are contained in the report which my department placed in the Library of the House in September last year. Although the report contains information on the recovery of bodies and wreckage, which were taken to Rosslare for examination by the Irish Authorities, it does not provide the identities of the dead. This, and the current condition and location of the wreckage, is a matter for the Irish Government.

HMS Penelope

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library the recorded version or notes of the RAF briefing given to officers of HMS Penelope on 26 March 1968; and if he will make this material available to the Irish Government. [67436]

Mr. Doug Henderson: We have no record of such a briefing having taken place. HMS Penelope played no part in the search operation after 25 March.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

PDVN and Intranet

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chairman of the Information Committee how many hon. Members currently have access to *(a)* the PDVN and *(b)* the Parliamentary Intranet. [68434]

Mr. Allan: There are currently 227 Members registered to access the PDVN in their own name. However, many Members have connected their offices by requesting access for one or more staff members but not for themselves. Analysis of all login IDs issued in the names of Members shows that 517 Members' offices currently have access to the PDVN.

Access to the Parliamentary Intranet is through the PDVN and is unrestricted, so the numbers are the same. All PDVN users have access to the Intranet.

Website Addresses

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chairman of the Information Committee if he will include hon. Members' website addresses in the Palace of Westminster telephone directory. [68435]

Mr. Allan: When the production of the existing telephone directory is changed to a print out from the Serjeant at Arms/Telecomms database at the end of this year's summer adjournment, there will be an opportunity to include details of Members' web sites and e-mail addresses in the directory provided Members indicate their wish for it to be done.

TREASURY

Financial Services and Markets Bill

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the future recognition requirements for recognised investment exchanges and clearing houses under the Financial Services and Markets Bill. [69148]

Ms Hewitt: The new Financial Services and Markets Bill carries forward the main features of the existing recognition and exemption regime for investment exchanges and clearing houses, which has worked well. In order to become recognised, such bodies must fulfil certain regulatory criteria. These are currently contained in the Financial Services Act 1986 and the Companies Act 1989. Under the new Bill the requirements will be set out in secondary legislation. Putting the recognition requirements in secondary legislation will make it easier to respond to any market developments in this area.

The Treasury has today issued a consultation document on the new draft recognition requirements. Copies have been placed in the Libraries of the House. The deadline for comments is 30 April. We are consulting on these regulations well in advance so that we have the longest possible time to get them right.

European Budget

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what categories of expenditure are legalised by Article 138a of the Treaty of the European Community; and if he will state what appropriation and what expenditure in the Budget of the Community for the year 1999 are under that Article. [67929]

Ms Quin: I have been asked to reply.

Volume 2, Section 1 of the budget (Staffing, revenue and expenditure of the European Parliament) lists budget lines which cite Article 138a as a justification for spending. The lines are:

		1999 Appropriations
3705	Contribution to secretarial expenses and administrative expenditure of the political groups and expenses of the non-attached Members.	£9 million (12.7 Meuro)
3706	Other Political activities	£5 million (7.1 Meuro)
3708	Information work	£3.9 million (5.25 Meuro)

This expenditure is intended to cover activities other than those financed from budget lines 3705 and 3708, as well as the political activities of the non-attached Members.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Radio Licences

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if a holder can be granted more than one concurrent radio licence; and if he will make a statement. [67684]

Janet Anderson: Under the terms of the Broadcasting Acts 1990 and 1996 no one person may hold more than one national analogue licence, national digital multiplex licence or national digital sound programme service licence. A person may hold one FM and one AM licence for areas which share a potential audience overlap of over 50 per cent. and may apply to hold one further licence for the same area on either waveband subject to a public interest test operated by the Radio Authority.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what questions are asked of applicants for a radio licence; and if he will make a statement; [67681]

(2) what inquiries are made as to the background of people who apply for licences to run independent radio stations. [67680]

Janet Anderson: The Radio Authority is responsible for determining the process of the award of independent radio licences according to the provisions of the Broadcasting Acts 1990 and 1996. The Authority decides the questions asked of licence applicants. I understand that the Authority's standard application form requests details of the background of licence applicants, and details of others whose involvement in the preparation of a licence application has been substantial. The Radio Authority published on 29 January details of its licensing award procedures for commercial radio.

Departmental Legislation

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what additional legislation, not currently before Parliament, was assumed in the production of his Department's spending allocation for 1999–2000 to 2001–02 in the Comprehensive Spending Review. [68415]

Mr. Chris Smith: There is a longstanding convention that legislative proposals for each year are not announced before the Queen's Speech at the start of the relevant Session.

Radio Authority

Mr. Fabian Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if he intends to reappoint the current Chairman of the Radio Authority; and if he will make a statement; [68807]

(2) if he will make it his policy to require the Radio Authority to publish its minutes of proceedings; [68809]

(3) what assessment he has made of the accountability procedures *(a)* within the Radio Authority and *(b)* between the Radio Authority and his Department. [68808]

Janet Anderson: The current appointment of the Radio Authority Chairman expires on 31 December 1999. An announcement will be made in due course on the Chairmanship from 1 January 2000.

The Radio Authority is a statutory public corporation independent of Government and is responsible for interpreting its statutory duties under the Broadcasting Acts 1990 and 1996. Radio Authority members are bound by the Authority's detailed code of best practice, a copy of which is in the Libraries of the House. My Department has no supervisory role in its day-to-day activities and has no locus to direct the Authority to make public details of its proceedings. However, I welcome the recent publication by the Authority of details of its licensing award procedures for commercial radio.

Analogue and Digital Television

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if he will provide financial support to households that currently receive analogue terrestrial television, but which cannot receive digital terrestrial television to enable them to receive the digital television service *(a)* via digital satellite television and *(b)* by other means; [68588]

(2) when the switch-off date will be announced for analogue transmissions; [68593]

(3) if he will ensure that the proceeds from auctions of analogue spectrum are used to assist consumers and communities in the United Kingdom to receive the same quality of digital television service; [68592]

(4) what estimate he has made of the number of households in the UK which will not be directly served by digital terrestrial television; [68589]

(5) when he will respond to the consultations received following the publication of "Television: the Digital Future". [68587]

Janet Anderson: I refer my hon. Friend to the replies I gave on 10 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *122–23*. We are still considering the wide variety of opinions expressed in the responses to the consultation paper: "Television the Digital Future" and will make an announcement in due course.

Pop Music Industry

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans his Department has to provide support to the pop music industry. [68863]

Mr. Chris Smith: My Department, in consultation with other Departments, and with advice from the Music Industry Forum, plans to continue working closely with the music industry to identify areas where Government might be able to help it. The Forum has considered such issues as copyright, the New Deal, training, and provision of venues for live music. My aim is to help create the conditions in which this highly successful business can flourish further.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Racially Motivated Offences

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the number of racially motivated offences there were in the last year for which figures are available. [68220]

Mr. Boateng: Individual forces submit their racial incidents figures to Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary at the end of each year. These are incidents recorded under the Association of Chief Police Officers' definition of a racial incident:

"Any incident in which it appears to the reporting or investigating officer that the complaint involves an element of racial motivation; or any incident which includes an allegation of racial motivation made by any person".

Incidents included here are wider than the normal definition of a crime in the crime statistics and include low level harassment.

The latest available figure for the number of racial incidents recorded by the police in England and Wales is 13,878 in 1997/98. A breakdown of the number of incidents recorded by the police by each police area in 1997/98 is given in the Home Office publication "Statistics on Race and the Criminal Justice System" 1998, a copy of which is available in the Library.

The Home Office has requested all forces to provide separate recorded crime statistics for the racially aggravated offences of wounding, harassment, common assault and criminal damage (in line with the new offences contained in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998) from April 1999, and first figures will be published in January 2000.

Parole

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to give new directions to the Parole Board following the implementation of section 103 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. [69273]

Mr. Straw: Section 103 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 was commenced on 1 January 1999. As a result, all short-term prisoners whose original offences were committed on or after that date and who are subsequently released on licence will be subject to recall by the Parole Board in the same way as those released from long-term sentences.

I have, therefore, prepared new Directions for the Board as to the matter to be taken into account in dealing with such recalls. These Directions are being made under the powers given to me by section 32(6) of the Criminal Justice Act 1991 and are based very closely on the existing Directions in respect of long-term prisoners.

The new Directions also make it clear that there should be a clear presumption in favour of recall in cases where a licensee is charged with an offence committed whilst subject to Home Detention Curfew (HDC). This is because the commission of an offence by a prisoner subject to HDC is clearly a breach of the trust placed in that individual.

I have written to Usha Prashar, Chairman of the Parole Board, informing her of the new Directions. Copies of the new Directions have been placed in the Library.

Deportation Orders

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people are currently in custody awaiting deportation. [68987]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Regrettably, reliable information on the numbers of persons in custody, or otherwise detained, who are the subject of deportation action is available only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many people were removed from the United Kingdom as a result of the enforcement of a deportation order in each year since 1992; [68988]

(2) how many people were removed or departed voluntarily in each year since 1992, following the initiation of deportation action against them but without a deportation order being made. [68984]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The available annual information is given in the table.

Removals and voluntary departures following deportation action, 1992 to 1997

	1992	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
Deportation orders enforced	880	850	670	700	900	800
Other removals and voluntary Departures[1]	1,710	1,430	1,250	1,200	1,110	1,250

[1] Removals and voluntary departures following the initiation of deportation action but without a deportation order having been made. Figures are rounded.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many deportation orders were made in each of the first five months of 1997. [68986]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information is given in the table.

Deportation orders made, 1 January to 31 May 1997

	Number of deportation orders made
January	110
February	90
March	90
April	130
May	60

Note:
Figures are rounded

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many deportation orders were made in each year from 1992 to 1996; and how many have not yet been executed. [68985]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The available information is given in the table. It should be noted that some deportation orders may not have been executable for legal reasons.

Deportation orders made and numbers of those not executed [1], 1992 to 1996

Year	Number of deportation orders made	Of which: number not executed [1]
1992	890	[2]—
1993	1,240	[2]—
1994	1,540	570
1995	1,690	730
1996	1,880	980

[1] Relates to the number of deportation orders made in the year concerned which had not been executed by January 1999. The figures exclude deportation orders enforced and cases where deportation is no longer appropriate.
[2] Data not available
Note:
Figures are rounded

Badgers

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prosecutions there have been for offences in relation to badgers in each of the last three years. [68728]

Mr. George Howarth: Information taken from the Home Office Court Proceedings Database is given in the table.

Number of defendants prosecuted for offences under the Protection of Badgers Act 1992, England and Wales, 1995–1997

Offence	1995	1996	1997
Offences of cruelty to badgers and special protection for badgers and their setts (excluding section 13 of Act)	41	31	44
Failing to give up a dog for destruction or having custody of a dog while disqualified (section 13 of Act)	7	6	7

Metropolitan Police

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers have resigned from the Metropolitan Police in each of the last 10 years. [68496]

Mr. Boateng: The Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police tells me that the numbers of officers who resigned from the Metropolitan Police in each of the last ten years, were:

Year	Number
1989	605
1990	471
1991	246
1992	132
1993	139
1994	146
1995	171
1996	183
1997	223
1998	327

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the average age of police officers in the Metropolitan Police; and what has been the average age in each of the last 10 years. [68498]

Mr. Boateng: The Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police tells me that the average age of police officers in the Metropolitan Police is 37 years and 3 months. The average age of Metropolitan Police officers in each year since 1993 was:

Year	Average age
1993	35 years 2 months
1994	35 years 7 months
1995	35 years 5 months
1996	36 years 5 months
1997	36 years 2 months
1998	38 years 4 months

Information for previous years is not readily available.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers currently serving in the Metropolitan Police have more than *(a)* 25 years' service and *(b)* 30 years' service. [68492]

Mr. Boateng: The Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police tells me that there are 3,359 officers currently serving in the Metropolitan Police who have more than 25 years' service and that 1,074 officers have more than 30 years' service.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many applications for early retirement on health grounds made by police officers in the Metropolitan Police were *(a)* approved and *(b)* refused in each of the last 10 years; [68493]

(2) how many police officers retired on health grounds from the Metropolitan Police in each of the last 10 years. [68495]

Mr. Boateng: The Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police tells me that the Metropolitan Police do not keep aggregated records of refusals of applications to retire on the grounds of ill health. Once approval is given to retire on medical grounds, the officer must retire within six weeks. The number of applications by officers to retire on medical grounds which have been approved in each of the past ten years were:

Year	Number
1989	300
1990	224
1991	275
1992	312
1993	342
1994	380
1995	433
1996	431
1997	412
1998	549

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers currently serving in the Metropolitan Police have ill-health retirement applications outstanding; and how many such officers are *(a)* on full pay, *(b)* on half pay and *(c)* on no pay. [68494]

Mr. Boateng: The Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police tells me that, at the end of November 1998, applications from 55 officers to retire on the grounds of ill health were outstanding. Of these officers, 44 were on full pay, seven on half-pay and four off pay.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers *(a)* applied for transfer and *(b)* were transferred from the Metropolitan Police in each of the last 10 years. [68497]

Mr. Boateng: The Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police tells me that records for officers applying for transfers are not kept centrally. The numbers of officers who transferred to other forces over the last ten years were:

Year	*Number*
1989	249
1990	239
1991	198
1992	233
1993	179
1994	190
1995	180
1996	255
1997	285
1998	236

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the average length of service of police officers currently serving in the Metropolitan Police; and what was the average length of service in each of the last 10 years. [68499]

Mr. Boateng: The Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police tells me that the average length of service of police officers currently serving in the Metropolitan Police is 14 years and 4 months, and that the average length of service in each year from 1991 was:

Year	*Average length of service*
1991	12 years 8 months
1992	12 years
1993	12 years 6 months
1994	12 years 10 months
1995	13 years 6 months
1996	13 years 8 months
1997	13 years 9 months
1998	13 years 8 months

Information as to earlier years is not readily available.

Prisoners (Former Armed Forces Personnel)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will estimate the proportion of the prison population who are former members of HM Armed Forces. [67430]

Mr. George Howarth: The information requested is not available. No information regarding an individual's professional status, prior to reception into a Prison Service establishment, is recorded centrally.

Young Offenders

Mr. Forth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what *(a)* proportion and *(b)* number of young offenders were (i) white, (ii) black, (iii) Asian and (iv) other in each of the last five years; [68095]

(2) what estimate he has made of the proportion of persistent young offenders who are *(a)* white, *(b)* black, *(c)* Asian and *(d)* other in the last year for which figures are available. [68093]

Mr. Straw: Because ethnicity is not currently recorded at the point of conviction, there are no national data on the ethnicity of young offenders, or, it follows, of persistent young offenders.

Statistics on the ethnicity of the sentenced prison population are shown in the table. Additional research carried out in 1993 shows by ethnic origin the proportion of young persons aged 17–25 who reported they had committed offences. (Young People and Crime, Home Office Research Study No.145, 1995).

The Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, which was established on 30 September 1998 under section 41 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, has the function of monitoring the operation of the youth justice system. The Board is currently considering its data collection requirements in carrying out this function. These are likely to include information about the characteristics of young offenders and the effectiveness of intervention work with them in preventing reoffending. This information will be collected from youth offending teams, established under section 39 of the 1998 Act, which the Government expect to implement nationally in April 2000.

Prison population
Sentenced young offenders by ethnic group

	Total	*White*	*Black*	*South Asian*	*Chinese and other*	*Not recorded*
Numbers at 30 June						
1993	4,980	4,380	384	143	25	48
1994	5,202	4,527	459	141	68	7
1995	5,587	4,727	595	170	85	10
1996	6,600	5,274	954	228	111	33
1997	7,934	6,397	1,088	271	156	22
1998[1]	8,502	6,773	1,257	276	189	7
Percentages						
1993	100	88	8	3	1	1
1994	100	87	9	3	1	0
1995	100	85	11	3	2	0
1996	100	80	14	3	2	1
1997	100	81	14	3	2	0
1998[1]	100	80	15	3	2	0

[1] 1998 data at end September 1998

Mr. Forth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the elements of the Government's strategy for preventing youth crime which have been specifically targeted at ethnic minorities, [68092]

Mr. Straw: The Government set out their strategy for preventing youth crime in the White Paper "No More Excuses—a New Approach To Tackling Youth Crime in England and Wales". The clear aim of that strategy is to prevent offending and re-offending by juveniles. This is

now the statutory principal aim of the youth justice system, as set out in section 37 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998.

The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 provides a range of new measures designed to be effective in preventing youth crime, irrespective of the ethnic background of those who seek to break the law. The Government are currently piloting new measures in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, including the final warning scheme, new community-based court disposals, and youth offending teams, with national implementation planned for around April 2000. To date, the Government have also introduced a range of measures to speed up the youth justice system, and have established the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales which will provide advice on the operation and performance of the youth justice system.

Crime Statistics

Mr. Forth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many assaults have been committed in each of the past five years by *(a)* white individuals against black individuals and vice versa, *(b)* white individuals against Asian individuals and vice versa and *(c)* Asian individuals against black individuals and vice versa; [68094]

(2) what categories of recorded crime were most frequently committed by each of the following ethnic groups *(a)* white, *(b)* black, *(c)* Asian and *(d)* others, in each of the last five years; [68065]

(3) how many street robberies were carried out *(a)* in total and *(b)* by each ethnic group in each of the last five years; [68063]

(4) for each of the past five years, how many and what proportion of crimes were committed by offenders who were *(a)* white, *(b)* black, *(c)* Asian and *(d)* other. [68096]

Mr. Straw: Data on ethnicity are currently collected by the police, prison and probation services, but not as yet by the courts. The only data on crimes committed by ethnic group would come from court convictions. It follows, therefore, that there are at present no national data on the ethnicity of offenders as a whole.

The Home Office regularly summarises the available information on ethnicity and the criminal justice system in statistical reports published under section 95 of the Criminal Justice Act 1991. The latest of these was published on 8 December 1998 and is available in the Library and on the Internet at: http:www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/index.htm

It is likely that a number of the crime and disorder audits carried out by local authorities under the provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 may in appropriate cases include local data of the kind which the hon. Member seeks. One such is that recently published by the London Borough of Lambeth and the relevant Divisions to the Metropolitan Police Service. I have arranged for a copy to be placed in the Library.

Mr. Forth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will assess the benefits of introducing a category of racially motivated crime in crime statistics. [68064]

Mr. Straw: All police forces collect information on racial incidents, based on the Association of Chief Police Officers definition of

> "Any incident in which it appears to the reporting or investigating officer that the complaint involves an element of racial motivation; or any incident which includes an allegation of racial motivation made by any person".

Incidents included here are wider than the normal definition of a crime in the crime statistics and include general threatening behaviour. These statistics are regularly published under section 95 of the Criminal Justice Act 1991.

The Home Office, police and Crown Prosecution Service monitor the provisions covering racially aggravated offences established by sections 28–32 and 82 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. These findings will first be published under section 95 of the Criminal Justice Act 1991 in January 2000.

Given the widespread concern about racially motivated crimes, and the recent approval of Parliament for specific racially aggravated offences in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 it is essential that such data should be collected. The benefits are clear.

Millennium Compliance (Hampshire)

Mr. Rapson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of progress on millennium compliance for the emergency services in Hampshire. [68131]

Mr. Straw: Fire and police services provide quarterly reports to Cabinet Office about progress towards Year 2000 compliance. These reports are published in summary in the Library and in detail on the Internet. The NHS Executive also publishes details of ambulance service quarterly progress reports on the Internet.

My Department monitors the progress reports from fire and police services. It is working with Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Fire Services, and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and the Association of Chief Police Officers respectively to encourage fire brigades and police forces to take the necessary action. I understand that the NHS Executive works with ambulance trusts to ensure that their Year 2000 preparations are on course.

The latest reports from the emergency services in Hampshire give the following dates for Year 2000 compliance:

Constabulary: March 1999

Fire service: June 1999

Ambulance service: Now compliant.

A programme of independent assessment of the Year 2000 preparations being made by key elements of the national infrastructure is taking place under the auspices of the National Infrastructure Forum. This is facilitated by Action 2000 and the Cabinet Office. The outcome of the assessment of the emergency services should be published in the Summer.

Electro-shock Batons

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if the company that was responsible for

handling, storing and distributing the electro-shock batons that were trans-shipped from the United States to Saudi Arabia via the United Kingdom under the 1993 trans-shipment licence granted by the Department of Trade and Industry had been issued with the relevant licences under section 5 of the Firearms Act 1968; [68190]

(2) if the companies that were granted export licences by the Department of Trade and Industry for the export of electro-shock batons from the United Kingdom between 1989 and 1994 had been granted the relevant licence under section 5 of the Firearms Act to *(a)* handle, *(b)* store, *(c)* distribute and *(d)* manufacture such weapons; [68191]

(3) what actions his Department has taken against *(a)* companies and *(b)* individuals that were not in possession of the relevant firearms licences for the handling, storage, distribution or manufacture of electro-shock batons. [68240]

Mr. Boateng: Two of the four companies in question had authority to deal in weapons prohibited by section 5(1)(b) of the Firearms Act 1968, which would include electro-shock weapons as well as other types of weapons capable of discharging a noxious liquid, gas or other things. The other two companies, one of which was the company granted the trans-shipment licence, did not have such authority.

The investigation of possible offences under the Firearms Acts is a matter for the police, who will consider whether there are grounds to bring criminal charges. The decision as to whether or not to prosecute in an individual case rests with the Crown Prosecution Service. The Home Office have no powers to intervene. However, information about the two companies that did not have authority to deal in prohibited weapons was forwarded by the Home Office to the relevant police forces for their consideration. I understand that, in both cases, the police have decided to take no further action.

Police Officers (Criminal Proceedings)

Maria Eagle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the guidance in Home Office Circular 4/1998, relating to the payment of money to officers, either former or serving, involved in criminal proceedings, applies *(a)* to officers who have retired on health grounds with outstanding disciplinary charges against them and *(b)* to officers against whom outstanding disciplinary charges have been dropped because of a retirement on health grounds of another officer. [68225]

Mr. Boateng: There is no express statutory provision enabling police authorities to provide financial assistance to officers involved in criminal proceedings. The circular makes it clear that it is entirely for individual police authorities to decide in the particular circumstances of a case and, on the basis of legal advice, whether to make financial assistance available to officers, either former or serving, in criminal proceedings. It does not seek to offer guidance on the specific circumstances of a case.

Maria Eagle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to review Home Office Circular 4/1998 relating to the payment of money to officers, either former or serving, involved in criminal proceedings in respect of the payment of the defence costs of officers from the police budget. [68845]

Mr. Boateng: Home Office Circular 4/1998 was issued after full consultation with the Association of Chief Police Officers, the Police Superintendents Association, the Police Federation and the Association of Police Authorities. We have no plans at present to review it.

South Yorkshire Police Authority

Maria Eagle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the average annual cost in the South Yorkshire Police Authority area of keeping a police constable on the beat. [68224]

Mr. Boateng: I understand from the South Yorkshire Police Authority that the full average annual cost of a beat constable is around £41,300. This includes pay, pensions, and running costs.

Ethnic Minorities (Crime)

Mr. Forth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what research his Department has *(a)* undertaken and *(b)* commissioned in the past year into crime among ethnic minorities; and when the results of any such research will be made available to the public. [68111]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 28 January 1999]:* Since 1 January 1998, the Home Office has undertaken or commissioned a number of pieces of research which have included consideration of issues of ethnicity in the criminal justice system, patterns of offending between different ethnic groups, patterns of ethnic minority victimisation, and the operation of the criminal justice system in relation to ethnic minorities as suspects, offenders and victims of crime.

All commissioned research is published as a matter of course. I have strengthened the procedures for securing the integrity of regular statistical services by ensuring that they are published by the Director of the Research and Statistical Directorate and not Ministers, and on dates set well in advance.

I receive regular advice from my officials in the form of submissions and briefing papers about the research and statistical data available in the Department.

The current list, with dates of publication in brackets, is as follows:

Tackling Street Robbery: a Comparative Evaluation of Operation Eagle Eye
Stockdale J. E. and Gresham P. J.
PRG Crime Detection and Prevention Series 1998
(March 1998)

Ethnicity and Victimisation: findings from the 1996 British Crime Survey
Home Office Statistical Bulletin 6/98
(April 1998)

Sentencing Practice: an examination of decisions in magistrates' courts and the Crown Court in the mid-1990s
Flood-Page C and Mackie A
Home Office Research Study 180
(July 1998)

Prison Statistics, England and Wales
(July 1998)

Entry into the criminal justice system: a survey of police arrests and their outcome
Phillips C and Brown D
Home Office and Research Study 185
(August 1998)

Probation Statistics, England and Wales
(October 1998)

Statistics on Race and the Criminal Justice System
Published under section 95 of the Criminal Justice Act 1991
(December 1998)

Young Offenders from Different Ethnic Groups
Miller J
Home Office, Research, Development and Statistics Directorate
(Spring 1999)

Evaluation of the Racially Aggravated Offences in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998
Fitzgerald M
Home Office, Research, Development and Statistics Directorate
(Spring 2001)

and, possibly:

1998 Youth Lifestyles Survey
Flood-Page C
Home Office, Research, Development and Statistics Directorate
(Spring 2000),

which is expected to provide information on many aspects of young people's lifestyles including fear of crime, victimisation and self-reported offending.

Burials

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to review the provisions of the Local Authorities Cemeteries Order 1977 relating to the sale of exclusive right of burial to individual families. [68560]

Mr. George Howarth: No. Burial authorities have a wide discretion under the 1977 Order as to the length of time for which they may grant an exclusive right of burial, up to a maximum of 100 years. We understand that these arrangements generally work satisfactorily.

Struck-out Court Cases

Mr. Ivan Henderson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidelines exist for striking out court cases on the basis that they are an abuse of process; and if he will make a statement. [68242]

Mr. Hoon: I have been asked to reply.

Any application to stay proceedings on the grounds that they are an abuse of process is for the court to determine in accordance with the principles established in case law.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what consideration has been given to the financial cost to local authorities of provision for the educational needs of school-age children of asylum seekers in the assessment of any special grant settlement. [67728]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I have been asked to reply.

Through the Local Government Finance Settlement, Local Education Authorities are funded to provide education for school aged children of asylum seekers on school roll, in the same way as they are for other children on school roll. This arrangement will not be affected by the current review of the asylum seeking process, or any changes to the funding of other costs incurred by Local Authorities in meeting the needs of asylum seekers.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Waiting Lists

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many people were on the waiting list in each health and social services board for fracture operations in *(a)* 1995, *(b)* 1996, *(c)* 1997 and *(d)* at the latest available date. [67859]

Mr. McFall: Patients requiring fracture operations are treated on an emergency basis and therefore are not, routinely, placed on waiting lists for surgery. From time to time a small number of patients may have to wait for treatment. On 29 January, 31 patients were awaiting fracture operations, and 19 operations were scheduled for that day.

RUC Stations (Ministerial Visits)

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list the Royal Ulster Constabulary stations to which she has paid a visit since 1 May 1997, indicating the date and the time spent at each such police station. [67658]

Marjorie Mowlam: The location, date and duration of each such visit are shown in the table.

Location	*Date*	*Duration (minutes)*
Strand road	9 May 1997	30
Lurgan	17 June 1997	30
Newtownabbey	26 September 1997	40
Dungannon	8 October 1997	30
Musgrave street, Belfast	24 October 1997	30
Ballymoney	7 November 1997	30
Enniskillen	13 February 1998	30
Waterside	13 March 1998	30
Strand road	12 May 1998	45
Antrim	18 May 1998	30
Mahon road	10 July 1998	30

It should be noted that the durations above have been taken from the programme schedules arranged prior to each visit, as opposed to exact times on the day (which are not readily available). Visits of this kind regularly exceed the arranged times.

Prisoners (Early Release)

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many persons given early release from prison under the Belfast agreement have been charged with an offence since their release. [68867]

Mr. Ingram: None.

WALES

Departmental Papers (Access for Visually Impaired)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has for departmental *(a)* White and *(b)* Green Papers to be made available on floppy disk format in a form which facilitates access for the visually impaired. [67850]

Mr. Michael: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office on 27 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *296*. In considering the changes in IT needed in preparation for the arrival of the National Assembly for Wales, I have asked my officials to make provisions for making documents and information accessible to people for whom the standard printed form is not appropriate. This will include floppy disk versions which are in a format which facilitates access for the visually impaired. Guidance on how to reach the largest possible target audience when producing documents for use by people outside the Department, including White and Green Papers, has been issued to staff at the Welsh Office. The Guidance will also be incorporated into a revised Equal Opportunities Handbook.

Tourism

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on his policies for the tourism industry in North East Wales. [68361]

Mr. Hain: The development of regional policies is an operational matter for the Wales Tourist Board within the Wales Tourism Strategy published in 1994 and endorsed by Ministers.

It is currently working with the Regional Tourism Company, local authorities and local businesses to implement a number of initiatives including growth in the short break/additional holiday market and development of business travel markets. North East Wales is particularly well placed to benefit from these matters.

I have asked the Board's Chief Executive to provide my hon. Friend with more details. A copy of his reply will be placed in the Library.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Rural Transport

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales by how much he has increased spending on rural transport in real terms between 1998–99 and 1999–2000. [68356]

Mr. Hain: The bus subsidy grant scheme will make £5 million available to local authorities in 1999–2000, of which £3 million must be spent on rural bus services and the remaining £2 million may be spent on either rural or urban services. In 1998–99 £2.25 million was made available exclusively for rural services. This means that direct support for rural bus services in 1999–2000 will increase by at least 30 per cent. in real terms, and probably significantly more than that.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Health Service Salaries

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what was the total cost of salaries for *(a)* nurses and *(b)* general practitioners in Wales in the last year for which figures are available. [68365]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: *(a)* In 1997–98 the total cost of salaries for nursing, midwifery, health visiting was £448.846 million.

(b) General practitioners are independent contractors to the NHS and information on their salaries is not collected centrally.

Source:

Annual accounts of NHS trusts and health authorities 1997–98.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Numeracy and Literacy

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is his assessment of the scale of improvements in numeracy and literacy in schools in Wales in the last year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [68355]

Mr. Hain: As the following table illustrates there has been an underlying improvement in the standards achieved in English, Welsh and mathematics. In all cases we are well on course to achieve the targets we have set for 2000 and 2002. Without exception we have already started making inroads into the year 2000 targets.

Percentage of pupils achieving the expected level [1]

	Key Stage 1 (7-year-olds)	*Key Stage 2 (11-year-olds)*	*Key Stage 3 (14-year-olds)*
English			
1996	78	56	56
1997	80	64	59
1998	80	64	62
Welsh			
1996	83	54	69
1997	85	56	69
1998	86	65	71
Mathematics			
1996	82	56	55
1997	83	64	59
1998	84	61	60

[1] Level 2 for 7-year-olds; level 4 for 11-year-olds; and level 5 for 14-year-olds

Targets: By 2000 between 60 and 70 per cent. of 11 and 14-year-olds should achieve the level expected for their age. By 2002 the target is between 70 and 80 per cent. achieving the expected levels.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Genetically Modified Crops

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is the current acreage of genetically modified crops under cultivation in Wales. [68357]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: There are no genetically modified crops under commercial cultivation in Wales nor in the rest of the UK.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Economic Prospects (North-East Wales)

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what new measures he is implementing to improve economic prospects in North-east Wales. [68354]

Mr. Hain: "Pathway to Prosperity—An Economic Agenda for Wales" was published last July. It contained a wide range of measures for modernising and raising the competitiveness of the Welsh economy including North East Wales. These include:

An Entrepreneurship Action Plan

Know How Wales

Millennium Bug Support

Strengthening Business Connect.

Numerous measures have been announced since that time, including:

A Business and Environment Challenge Scheme

Connect for a Better Business.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

School Pupils

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many children attend *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary schools in each of the county authorities in Wales. [68358]

Mr. Hain: The information is as follows:

Full and part time pupils in LEA maintained and grant-maintained schools by unitary authority: numbers at January 1998

Unitary authority	*Primary*	*Secondary*
Blaenau Gwent	7,923	4,538
Bridgend	13,188	9,262
Caerphilly	18,978	12,746
Cardiff	31,191	20,884
Carmarthenshire	15,767	12,085
Ceredigion	5,934	4,977
Conwy	10,084	6,888
Denbighshire	9,098	6,713
Flintshire	15,331	10,076
Gwynedd	10,965	7,220
Isle of Anglesey	6,469	4,878
Merthyr Tydfil	6,567	4,673
Monmouthshire	7,656	5,326
Neath Port Talbot	14,347	9,194
Newport	15,015	9,685
Pembrokeshire	11,220	7,966
Powys	11,755	8,289
Rhondda, Cynon, Taff	24,931	18,308
Swansea	22,524	15,432
Torfaen	9,711	7,382
Vale of Glamorgan	12,413	8,312
Wrexham	12,624	7,018
Wales	293,691	201,852

Source:
Schools' Census

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Housing Policy

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on his policy for housing in Wales. [68600]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The Government's objectives for housing in Wales are to offer everyone in Wales the opportunity of a decent home, to achieve clear improvements in all housing tenures and to do so in the context of the promotion of sustainable development. The 1999–2000 Government's Expenditure Plans: Departmental Report by the Welsh Office which will be published in April, and which takes into account the outcome of the public consultation on the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review: Spending Plans 1999–2002, will set out the mechanisms by which this objective will be met. Copies of the Departmental Report will be placed in the Library of the House.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Alyn and Deeside (WDA Strategy)

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what guidance he has given to the North Wales region of the WDA with regards to a strategy for inward investment, job creation and infrastructure in Alyn and Deeside; and if he will make a statement. [68583]

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friend announced on 26 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *172* that he had issued Strategic Guidance to the Welsh Development Agency for the period to March 2000.

This sets out the broad operational priorities which we want the Agency to follow, with the objectives of spreading economic success to every part of Wales including the North Wales region and the Alyn and Deeside area; and bringing each area's local economy nearer to the level of the best.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Teachers

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many whole-time equivalent teachers are currently employed in Wales; and how many were employed in May 1997. [68519]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 1 February 1999]:* Information on employment of teachers is collected annually in January. At January 1997 and 1998 there were respectively 26,500 and 26,135 whole-time equivalent qualified teachers employed in Wales.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

PRIME MINISTER

North Sea Oil and Gas

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Prime Minister if an official history of the Development of North Sea Oil and Gas is being commissioned. [69212]

The Prime Minister: Yes. I have appointed Professor Alexander Kemp of Aberdeen University as an official historian to write the official history of the Development of North Sea Oil and Gas.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Office for the Supervision of Solicitors

Mr. Amess: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what steps he has taken to monitor the work of the Office for the Supervision of Solicitors; and if he will make a statement. [68320]

Mr. Hoon: The Office for the Supervision of Solicitors is an independent body, and the Government do not have a role in monitoring the work of the Office. However, the Legal Services Ombudsman oversees the handling of complaints against members of the legal profession. She stated in her last annual report that, although the Office had made some improvements since it started operating in September 1996, there was still a long way to go. When the Ombudsman publishes her next annual report this summer, I will consider whether any further action is necessary.

Personal Injury Litigation

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what was, for personal injury litigation, *(a)* the cost of legal aid before cost recovery and retention of contributions, *(b)* the amount of costs recovered, *(c)* the amount of damages retained, *(d)* the amount of contributions retained and *(e)* the net cost after deduction of costs recovered, damages retained and contributions retained for (i) all personal injury litigation, (ii) medical negligence cases and (iii) personal injury cases excluding medical negligence in 1997–98. [68228]

Mr. Hoon: Closed case data for 1997–98 are incomplete and will not include five months' data for Nottingham and six weeks for Chester. This is due to the implementation in these two area offices of the Legal Aid Board's new Corporate Information System, which is temporarily unable to access closed case information. A breakdown of the available legal aid expenditure and receipts in respect of personal injury litigation and medical negligence cases for cases closed in 1997–98 was as follows:

£ million

Closed case 1997–98	*Gross payments*	*Costs received*	*Damages retained*	*Contributions retained*	*Net costs*
All Personal Injury Litigation	307.7	234.3	6.0	2.3	65.6
Medical Negligence	63.0	32.6	1.3	0.7	28.5
Personal Injury (excl. medical negligence)	224.7	201.7	4.7	1.5	37.1

Departmental Legislation

Mr. Maude: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what additional legislation, not currently before Parliament, was assumed in the production of his Department's spending allocation for 1999–2000 to 2001–02 in the Comprehensive Spending Review. [68419]

Mr. Hoon: There is a longstanding convention that legislative proposals for each year are not announced before the Queen's Speech at the start of the relevant Session. My Department's spending allocation does take account of the Access to Justice Bill.

Departmental Responsibilities

Mr. Maude: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what responsibilities which his Department had prior to the Comprehensive Spending Review are to be *(a)* discontinued by his Department, *(b)* transferred to another department, *(c)* transferred to an executive agency and *(d)* added to his Department over the period 1998–99 to 2001–02. [68403]

Mr. Hoon: No responsibilities held by this Department prior to the Comprehensive Spending Review are to be discontinued or transferred, either to another department or to an executive agency. From October 2000, this Department will take over from the Home Office responsibility for the enforcement of financial penalties. Responsibility for non-financial penalties could be transferred at the same time, or at a later date.

The Comprehensive Spending Review also provided an opportunity to reappraise spending plans and initiatives, and to reprioritise initiatives so as to provide properly for the needs of a modern and efficient justice system.

Child Abuse

Mr. Ivan Henderson: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department on how many occasions in each of the last 10 years abuse of process was used by a judge to dismiss a case concerning child abuse. [68241]

Mr. Hoon: This information is not collected.

SOCIAL SECURITY

State Pensions

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the effect of linking the basic state pension for those aged over 75 years to earnings rather than prices on *(a)* gross expenditure on NI benefits, *(b)* expenditure on means-tested benefits and *(c)* income tax revenues in (i) 2005 and (ii) 2010. [67976]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 28 January 1999]:* The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

£ billion in 1999–2000 benefit rates

Expenditure	*2005–06*	*2010–11*
Basic Retirement Pension	2.2	3.9
Means-tested benefit offsets	–0.7	–1.2

Notes:
1. Inland Revenue is not able to provide estimates for tax effects in the years in question.
2. Retirement Pension estimates have been provided by the Government Actuary's Department.
3. Increased rates are assumed payable to pensioners aged 75 and over at each of the given dates. Category BL rates were increased where the recipient is 75 or over, including cases where the spouse whose contribution record provides entitlement is under 75. Adult Dependency Increases paid in respect of women aged under 75 were not increased.
4. Estimates are rounded to the nearest £0.1 billion, but are not necessarily accurate to that degree.
5. Estimates of means-tested benefit offsets are illustrative and assume price uprating of Income Support. They are based on the 1995–96 Family Resources Survey and the Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry. Possible future increases in income, other than the proposed increases in Basic Retirement Pension, have not been taken into account.

Mr. John Farren

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he expects to update the National Insurance Contributions records of Mr. John Farren, a constituent. [68234]

Mr. Timms: The National Insurance account for the hon. Member's constituent, Mr. Farren, will be updated by the 15 March 1999.

Forecast Expenditure

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list his latest estimates and forecast expenditure in cash terms for cyclical social security for (i) 1997–98, (ii) 1998–99, (iii) 1999–2000, (iv) 2000–01 and (v) 2001–02. [68385]

Mr. Darling: Government expenditure is no longer classified as being Cyclical or as part of the Control Total. Major reforms to tighten the control and to improve the long term planning of public spending were announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report (published June 1998). Spending plans across the public sector is known as Total Managed Expenditure (TME). Large demand-led programmes, such as DSS benefits expenditure, are brought together in Annually Managed Expenditure (AME). The latest forecasts for DSS benefits expenditure were published in the November 1998 Pre-Budget Report.

Departmental Papers (Access for Visually Impaired)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has for departmental *(a)* White and *(b)* Green Papers to be made available on floppy disk format in a form which facilitates access for the visually impaired. [67846]

Mr. Bayley: I refer my hon. Friend to the Written Answer that my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, gave on 27 January 1999, *Official Report*, column 296.

It is the practice of this Department to facilitate access for the visually impaired by producing all White and Green Papers in braille and audio versions and they are made available from The Stationery Office at the same price as the print version. Free summary versions, also available in braille and audio, can be ordered by calling 0181 867 3201.

In addition, we produce an electronic version for publishing on the Internet and we are able to make floppy disk versions available on request.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to introduce new ways of detecting and combating Disability Living Allowance fraud following the abolition of the Benefit Integrity Project. [67760]

Mr. Bayley: The Benefit Integrity Project (BIP) gathered up to date information about the care and mobility needs of disabled people with the highest awards of Disability Living Allowance (DLA), to check that they were receiving the right amount of DLA. The Benefit Integrity Project will end on 31 March 1999, to be replaced by a new and fairer system. No new cases will be selected for the project after this date. Cases where action has already started will continue to be processed through the remaining stages of adjudication, including review and appeal, in the normal way.

We are determined to ensure that people are receiving the correct amount of benefit. But there is currently no automatic review mechanism within DLA. Therefore, from April a new system of periodic review will be introduced. It will incorporate the lessons already learned and will be continually evaluated and refined as it develops. Staff involved in the new processes will receive full training before commencing this new work.

We are already talking to disability groups about ways to ensure the new system is sensitive to people's circumstances, and that it is both fair and effective.

Family Credit

Mr. Shaw: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many recipients of family credit there are in the *(a)* Maidstone area and *(b)* Medway area. [67468]

Angela Eagle: The administration of Family Credit is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Jonathan Shaw, dated 1 February 1999:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many recipients of Family Credit there are in the (a) Maidstone and (b) Medway areas.

The Family Credit Unit produces statistics which show the number of recipients within the area covered by Benefits Agency (BA) offices. The area of Medway is covered by the BA Chatham office.

The number of Family Credit recipients for the Maidstone and Chatham areas are shown in the table.

Number of family credit recipients in the Maidstone and Chatham benefits agency offices areas

Office	*Number of recipients*
Maidstone	1,146
Chatham	2,318

Notes:
Figures as at October 1998
Figures are provisional and subject to change
Source:
Family Credit Unit.

I hope you find this reply useful.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Maritime and Coastguard Agency

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many representations he has received about the creation of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency; and how many representations opposed setting up the new body. [68058]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Following the announcement of the creation of a new Marine Agency on 19 August 1997 to combine the work of the Coastguard Agency and the Marine Safety Agency from 1 April 1998, several letters were received, mainly referring to the Coastguard 5 year Strategy. Of these received 7 made mention of the merger, of which four expressed concern but none opposed the setting up of a new body. Since the launch of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency there have been a number of letters from industry and others endorsing the benefits of the merged agency.

Freight Flights (Heathrow)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many air freight flights representing what freight tonnage were recorded *(a)* to and *(b)* from (i) Heathrow, (ii) Gatwick and (iii) Stansted in each of the last five years. [68575]

Ms Glenda Jackson: What information is available is shown in the table.

Freight movements at Gatwick, Heathrow and Stansted: 1994–98

Number

	Gatwick	*Heathrow*	*Stansted*
Freight flights			
1994			
Arrivals	2,741	1,951	4,445
Departures	2,456	2,023	5,152
1995			
Arrivals	2,635	1,548	4,688
Departures	2,470	1,994	4,928
1996			
Arrivals	2,783	1,655	4,683
Departures	2,497	2,023	4,946
1997			
Arrivals	2,274	1,734	5,034
Departures	2,085	1,853	5,228
1998			
Arrivals	2,035	1,604	6,587
Departures	1,723	1,714	6,509

Freight movements at Gatwick, Heathrow and Stansted: 1994–98

Tonnes

	Gatwick	*Heathrow*	*Stansted*
Freight			
1994			
Set Down	15,292	41,904	39,206
Picked Up	18,838	47,348	44,004
1995			
Set Down	22,521	43,151	42,811
Picked Up	28,014	51,267	45,403
1996			
Set Down	32,219	44,983	50,513
Picked Up	33,540	49,521	51,440
1997			
Set Down	14,316	58,536	64,020
Picked Up	19,258	56,022	60,748
1998			
Set Down	6,944	55,527	94,312
Picked Up	10,896	51,353	82,818

Fly-tipping

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to introduce further measures to discourage fly-tipping. [68627]

Mr. Meale: Stringent controls and severe penalties are in place to discourage the illegal disposal of waste (fly-tipping) and the Environment Agency has made clear its commitment to taking firm enforcement action. The main controls and the maximum penalties were set out in my reply to my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice), on 8 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *120–21*. We have no plans to introduce further measures.

Sewerage

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if his Department's programme of investment in cleaning up water and sewage will provide assistance to local authorities wishing to transfer Housing Act sewage works to water companies. [68586]

Mr. Meale: The Department does not offer financial assistance to help bring Housing Act sewage works up to the required standard to enable them to be adopted by the sewerage undertaker. There are provisions in the Water Industry Act 1991 which enable these works to be adopted but the financial implications are a matter for the sewerage undertaker and local authority. Under section

105 of the 1991 Act, an owner of any sewerage works may appeal to the Director General of Water Services in the event of a dispute with the sewerage undertaker over an agreement to adopt.

Direct Labour Organisations

Mr. Lock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if his Department will conduct a review of the bodies which a direct labour organisation of a district council is permitted to enter into contracts with as specified in the Local Authorities (Goods and Services) Act 1970; and if he will make a statement. [68567]

Mr. Raynsford: My officials are reviewing the way the Local Authorities (Goods and Services) Act 1970 works. Any changes to its administration have to be considered in the context of the Local Government Bill, now before Parliament, which would allow the Secretary of State to modify existing legislation so as to facilitate local authorities achieving best value. It would be premature to discuss how this power might be exercised in advance of Parliament discussing the relevant provisions of the Bill.

Private Playing Fields

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to control development on private playing fields. [68566]

Mr. Raynsford: Planning Policy Guidance note 17: "Sport and Recreation" provides advice on this issue. It emphasises the special significance of playing fields, including those that are privately owned and that they should normally be protected from development, taking into account the long-term needs of the community for recreation and amenity open space.

Last month, my Department issued Circular 9/98: the Town and Country Planning (Playing Fields) (England) Direction 1998. This applies to any application for developing private land which is currently or has at any time in the five years before the application been used as a playing field by an educational institution.

Homelessness

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people are currently registered as homeless; and how many were so registered in May 1997. [68607]

Mr. Raynsford: Local authorities in England report in their quarterly P1(E) returns the number of households accepted as homeless and in priority need under the homelessness provisions of the 1985 and 1996 Housing Acts.

The latest available estimates are for the quarter ending September 1998, when local authorities accepted some 27,500 households. The corresponding figure for the quarter ending June 1997 was 24,930 households.

Groundwater Regulations 1998

Mrs. Shephard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to publish the Groundwater Regulations. [68967]

Mr. Meacher: The Groundwater Regulations 1998 were laid before Parliament on 11 November 1998. Transitional arrangements under the Regulations came into force on 1 January, and the main provisions come into force on 1 April 1999.

Minerals Extraction

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received in response to public consultation on the Draft Environmental Impact Assessment and Habitats (Extraction of Minerals by Marine Dredging) Regulations 1999; and if he will make a statement. [69213]

Mr. Caborn: Public consultation on the Draft Environmental Impact Assessment and Habitats (Extraction of Minerals by Marine Dredging) Regulations was carried out for a six week period in the autumn of last year. 46 responses were received from official bodies, from fishing interests, local authorities and environmental organisations. A list of the responses has been placed in the Library of the House and copies of all responses have been placed in the DETR Library. The Government are considering the responses.

Greater London Authority

Mr. Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what statutory authority exists for costs to be incurred by him in preparation for the establishment of the Greater London Authority and its functional and other associated bodies. [69214]

Mr. Raynsford: The Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill provides authority for preparations for the Greater London Authority itself. Authority for preparations for the remaining bodies will be provided by the Greater London Authority Bill once enacted. Parliamentary approval for expenditure on these remaining bodies will be sought as soon as practicable following enactment. This is likely to be through a Winter Supplementary Estimate for Class III Vote 4 (local government, England) for 1999–2000. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure in 1998–99 estimated at £320,000 will be met by repayable advances from the Contingencies Fund.

HEALTH

Waiting Lists

14. **Mr. Stringer:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what has been the change in the total number of people on NHS waiting lists in England since April 1998; and if he will make a statement on progress made in reducing waiting lists. [67172]

Mr. Denham: The total number of people on National Health Service waiting lists in England has fallen by over 150,000 since April 1998. By next April, we will deliver a record reduction in waiting lists to below the 1.16 million patients inherited from the previous Government. This will be the first step in delivering our pledge to bring down the waiting lists by 100,000 from the level we inherited in the lifetime of this Parliament.

29. **Mr. David Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what has been the change in the total number of people waiting over 12 months for treatment on NHS waiting lists in England since May 1998. [67188]

Mr. Denham: Over 12 months waiters have fallen by over 16,000, 22 per cent. since June 1998, to stand at 56,000 at the end of November 1998.

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients need to be treated in the Essex Rivers health authority to meet his Department's waiting list target at 31 March 1999. [67191]

Mr. Denham: The position as at November 1998 was that Essex Rivers Healthcare National Health Service Trust will need to achieve a reduction of 2,324 in order to achieve its 31 March 1999 waiting list target. North Essex Health Authority will need to achieve a reduction of 3,362 in order to achieve its 31 March 1999 waiting list target.

Renal Services

16. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the provision, per head of population, of renal services in *(a)* the South Lancashire health authority and *(b)* the rest of England. [67174]

Mr. Hutton: The actual take-up figure in the area covered by South Lancashire Health Authority was 50 patients per million population in the most recent year for which figures are available, that is, the year ended September 1997. The most recent national figures available are from a survey of service provision in 1995. The number of new patients in England accepted on to treatment (dialysis or kidney transplant) for end stage renal failure in 1995 was 82 per million population.

Investing in Dentistry Initiative

17. **Jackie Ballard:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the progress of grant applications under the Investing in Dentistry initiative. [67175]

Mr. Denham: To date, we have received over 600 Investing in Dentistry funding requests, 242 of which have been approved, and 236 refused. Decisions on the remaining applications will be made as soon as possible.

Out-patient Waiting Lists

18. **Mr. Forth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the total number of patients waiting more than 13 weeks for an out-patient consultation as of *(a)* the first quarter of 1997 and *(b)* the last quarter for which figures are available. [67177]

Mr. Denham: In the first quarter of 1997–98, 2,690,000 first outpatient attendances were provided, with 290,000 patients waiting over 13 weeks at 30 June. In the second quarter of 1998–99 (the latest available), 2,740,000 first outpatient attendances were provided, with 437,000 patients waiting over 13 weeks at 30 September 1998.

Winter Schemes

19. **Dr. Whitehead:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many winter schemes were supported by his Department through his Department's targeted winter schemes money. [67178]

Mr. Hutton: Over 2,000. These have enabled health and social services to work together to manage the very high emergency pressures we have seen over the past month.

39. **Mr. Dennis Turner:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many schemes were funded by his Department through targeted winter schemes money. [67198]

Mr. Denham: Over 2,000 schemes have been funded through this money. These have enabled health and social services to work together to manage the very high emergency pressures we have seen over the past month.

Nurses

20. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the percentage increase in nurses on trainee schemes was for 1997 over the previous year; and what proportion of this increase was made up of graduate nurses. [67179]

Mr. Denham: The English National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting collects statistical information on students on nurse trainee schemes and publishes the figures in their annual reports, but not in the format requested.

21. **Dr. Iddon:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the training of nurses. [67180]

Mr. Denham: We have already said that we must reform the system of nurse education and training.

We want to see more flexible, modular nurse education that has far stronger links with the NHS at all levels. We want student nurses to have more work-based learning in the NHS and see an NHS committed to preparing the next generation of nurses.

We will be discussing how we achieve this with representatives of the professions, the UK General Council and the universities.

24. **Mr. Lansley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many nurses were registered with the UK Central Council for England and Wales on (i) 1 May 1997 and (ii) 1 January 1999; and if he will make a statement. [67183]

Mr. Denham: For the information requested, I refer the hon. Member to the United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting.

27. **Helen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many extra nurse trainees would have entered

training in the years 1992 to 1997 if the level of intake matched expected levels for 1998 to 2001. [67186]

Mr. Denham: If the previous Government had matched our commitment to nurse training over their last five years of office, over 14,000 extra nurse trainees would have entered training.

36. **Jane Griffiths:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what improvements he is making to nurse education and training. [67195]

Mr. Denham: We wish to see nurse education become more accessible and provide nurses with the practical skills they need when they enter the National Health Service. We will be discussing how we achieve this with representatives of the professions and the universities, and with Sir Len Peach, Chair of the United Kingdom Central Council Commission for Education. The commission is reviewing nurse education and will report in the summer.

The NHS is already working to improve nurse education, for example by encouraging the use of longer practice placements and by working closely with universities to encourage more joint NHS/University-funded nurse teacher posts.

37. **Mr. Hurst:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many new student nurse trainees were forecast to start training in the year 1 January 1997 to 31 December 1997; and how many new student nurse trainees started training during that year. [67196]

Mr. Denham: From April 1997 to April 1998 the number of nurse training places was increased by just under 1,500 against a planned increase of 1,300.

Commission for Health Improvement

22. **Mrs. Mahon:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what powers will be available to the Commission for Health Improvement for supporting the local development of health care and spot-checking new arrangements. [67181]

Mr. Denham: Forthcoming legislation will set out powers to enable the Commission to obtain access to information for the purposes of conducting reviews of the implementation and adequacy of arrangements to monitor and improve the quality of healthcare provided by National Health Service Trusts and Primary Care Trusts.

NHS Staff (Retention)

23. **Mr. Boswell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to improve the retention of NHS staff. [67182]

Mr. Denham: "Working Together—Securing a quality workforce for the NHS", published in September 1998, sets targets for local employers to demonstrate year-on-year improvement in retention rates for all health professional staff.

Viagra

25. **Mr. Flight:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent representations he has received regarding making Viagra available on the NHS; and if he will make a statement. [67184]

Mr. Denham: Since September we have received some 490 written representations from Members of Parliament, professional representative bodies, patient groups and the public about the availability of Viagra on the National Health Service. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health announced on 21 January the start of a six-week public consultation on substantive policy proposals about the treatment of impotence on the NHS.

Equality of Provision

26. **Mr. Jenkins:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress he is making toward equality of provision in the national health service; and when he expects to achieve it. [67185]

Mr. Denham: The Government are producing National Service Frameworks, establishing the National Institute for Clinical Excellence and introducing a National Performance Assessment Framework, which will challenge and address variations in the provision of clinically and cost-effective treatments not based on the health needs and wishes of local people.

Cervical Screening

30. **Mr. Clapham:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to ensure equality of provision for cervical screening; and if he will make a statement. [67189]

Mr. Hutton: Tackling health inequalities is one of two key aims in "Our Healthier Nation" and it is a priority for health and social services. We are committed to ensuring that all women aged 20–64 have access to cervical screening at least every five years. In those health authorities areas which are not achieving 80 per cent. coverage, targeted initiatives are underway to improve coverage. At a national level, a new Inner Cities Action Group is identifying and disseminating good practice in increasing coverage among ethnic minority and lower socio-economic groups.

NHS Morale

33. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals he has put into effect with the aim of increasing morale in the NHS. [67192]

Mr. Denham: "Working Together: Securing a quality workforce for the NHS", a framework for managing human resources in the National Health Service, was circulated to the NHS on 22 September 1998 and is a major step forward in our drive to meeting the aspirations of both staff and employers. The pay review bodies have welcomed the initiatives that we announced to improve the quality of the working lives of staff.

By April 2000 employers will, among other measures, have to:

have systems in place to record and monitor workplace accidents and violence against staff, and have published strategies in place to achieve a reduction in such incidents;

have policies and procedures in place to tackle harassment by staff and service users, supported by monitoring and reporting arrangements to measure progress;

have in place occupational health services and counselling available for staff;

have in place training and development plans in place for the majority of health professionals;

have developed and reviewed their mechanisms for involving staff in planning and delivering health care;

achieve year-on-year improvement in sick absence rates and, where applicable, targeted progress towards national minimum benchmarks;

demonstrate year-on-year improvement in retention rates for all health professional staff and, where applicable, targeted progress towards national benchmarks;

have undertaken an annual staff attitude survey to act as a benchmark against which improvements to the quality of working life can be measured.

Accident and Emergency Departments

34. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his target for investment in the modernisation of accident and emergency departments during 1999. [67193]

Mr. Denham: The Government have announced an extra £30 million to modernise some 50 accident and emergency departments in the coming year.

Primary Care Groups

35. **Mr. Darvill:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many primary care groups he expects to commence during 1999. [67194]

Mr. Denham: 481 primary care groups will commence on 1 April 1999.

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if primary care groups may commission services. [67176]

Mr. Denham: Primary care groups will have the capacity to commission services from 1 April 1999. The degree of responsibility for commissioning services will be agreed between the primary care group and the health authority.

NHS Wages and Salaries

38. **Mr. Alan W. Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of the total NHS budget is taken up by the wages and salaries of *(a)* doctors, *(b)* nurses and *(c)* ancillary workers. [67197]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is as follows:

Paybill costs as a percentage of National Health Service expenditure: England 1997–98

	Percentage of NHS expenditure	*£ million*
NHS Total Expenditure	—	37,650
Doctors and dentists paybill	16.1	6,070
Nurses and midwives paybill	17.6	6,630
Ancillary staff paybill	2.6	970

Notes:
Paybill data for 1997–98 are provisional.
Figures for doctors and dentists include general practitioners and general dental practitioners.
Salaries for practice nurses, directly employed by GPs, are not included.
The figures for ancillary staff include directly employed staff. Ancillary staff are defined as support staff and classified through the new system of occupation coding for NHS non-medical staff, introduced in 1995.

Hospital Admissions (Leicestershire)

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent representations he has received on reducing pressure on hospital admissions in Leicestershire. [67190]

Mr. Denham: None. We understand that Leicestershire Health Authority has produced a comprehensive action plan agreed with the local authority social services department for managing the pressures on emergency services during the winter period.

An extra £250 million was announced in November 1998 to help the National Health Service and social services manage this winter's pressures. £2.6 million of this was allocated to Leicestershire Health Authority.

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people received specialist treatment for chronic fatigue syndrome at the Havering Hospital NHS Trust broken down by those treated as *(a)* out-patients and *(b)* in-patients in each of the last three years. [67009]

Ms Jowell: The figures available for chronic/postviral fatigue syndrome in Havering Hospital National Health Service Trust, for financial years 1995–96 to 1997–98 are shown in the table.

Chronic fatigue syndrome in Havering Hospital NHS Trust [1]

Year	*FCEs* [2]
1995–96	100
1996–97 [3]	83
1997–98 [3]	85

[1] Ordinary Admissions and Daycase combined: Finished Consultant Episodes (FCEs) by primary diagnosis for chronic/post viral fatigue syndrome in Havering Hospital NHS
[2] An FCE represents a complete period of inpatient treatment under the care of an individual hospital consultant, and in about 95 per cent. of cases, represents a complete spell in hospital.
[3] Figures for 1996–97 and 1997–98 are provisional—no adjustments have yet been made for shortfalls in data (the data are ungrossed)
Note:
ICD1 10 code used is G93.3
Source:
Department of Health, Hospital Episodes Statistics

The Department does not collect information on outpatients treated for chronic fatigue syndrome. The information that is available is contained in "Outpatients and Ward Attenders, England", copies of which are available in the Library.

Health Inequalities

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the cost of implementing the Acheson report on Inequalities in Health. [67605]

Ms Jowell: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) on 18 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *378*.

The terms of reference of the independent inquiry into inequalities in health (the Acheson report) required the review to be conducted within the broad framework of the Government's overall financial strategy. The whole

Government are firmly committed to reducing health inequalities. A range of initiatives is already helping to carry forward Sir Donald Acheson's recommendations. Modernising the health service and ensuring fair access to services is a vital component of that effort—backed up with a £21 billion boost over the next three years.

Drugs Prescriptions

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the savings which the NHS would have made in 1997–98 had equivalent generic drugs been prescribed in place of non-generics. [68450]

Mr. Denham: We estimate that, had equivalent generic drugs been prescribed in the community in place of proprietary items in the National Health Service in 1997–98, in all cases where equivalent generic drugs were available, then savings of some £66 million could in theory have been made. However, there are circumstances in which generic prescribing is inappropriate.

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what was the average income in 1997–98 in *(a)* a prescribing GP and *(b)* a dispensing GP; [68446]

(2) what is the average income supplement earned by a GP through dispensing. [68447]

Mr. Denham: The level of fees and allowances payable to general practitioners are set by the independent pay review body to deliver and distribute their recommended level of net incomes for GPs, taking account of the costs, pressures and workload of practice in different areas. Earnings from practice dispensing are an integral part of the overall recommendations of the Review Body.

The information requested is not available. However, the average net income of dispensing and non-dispensing general medical practitioners[1] in Great Britain in 1995–96 and 1996–97[2,3] was as follows:

£000

	1995–96 and 1996–97 average[2,3]
All general medical practitioners[1] (GMPs)	47,000
Dispensing GMPs	53,400
Non-dispensing GMPs	45,800

[1] Unrestricted principals in Great Britain excluding salaried partners and GMPs with zero list size.
[2] Separate data for each year are not available.
[3] Based on a sample survey; figures are approximate and subject to sampling variation.
Source:
Joint Health Departments/British Medical Association (General Practitioners Committee) Technical Steering Committee

Research and Development

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the expenditure on research and development by each NHS region in each year since 1992. [68226]

Ms Jowell: The expenditure of funds from the National Health Service research and development levy by and through the NHS Executive's regional offices since the establishment of the levy on 1 April 1996 is shown in the table.

Comparable data are not available for earlier years. The levy includes funding allocated through national competition to enable NHS trusts and other providers of NHS services to carry out, commission and host research and development of potential benefit to the health service (budget 1), as well as funding allocated to the NHS Executive headquarters and regional offices to commission research and development activity on behalf of the NHS as a whole (budget 2). Other government funded research also takes place in, and benefits, the NHS.

Spending from the NHS research and development levy, by region

	1996–97		*1997–98*		*1998–99*	
	Budget 1	*Budget 2*	*Budget 1*	*Budget 2*	*Budget 1*	*Budget 2*
Northern and Yorkshire	12,794	6,707	16,094	6,125	16,060	5,595
North West	18,019	5,867	20,413	7,085	20,479	7,109
Trent	18,040	4,257	20,512	4,359	20,830	4,560
West Midlands	6,313	5,125	9,734	4,717	10,091	4,592
Anglia and Oxford	8,838	9,310	17,829	10,040	18,345	10,130
South West	11,605	8,024	15,552	7,408	16,193	6,518
North Thames	260,294	7,300	198,996	6,9[illegible]	196,643	6,334
South Thames	22,705	5,197	50,889	6,07[illegible]	51,712	5,477
Totals	358,608	51,787	350,019	52,761	350,353	50,315

Notes:
Figures are outturn (provisional for 1998–99) in £000 at price level prevailing at the time.
There is a discontinuity in budget 1 allocations between 1996–97 and 1997–98 because accounting for research in postgraduate teaching hospitals was transferred from North Thames to the host regional office.
The table excludes national research and development programmes expenditure in budget 2 and £675,000 on budget 1 funds allocated during 1998–99 to cover the unforeseen costs incurred by providers hosting externally-funded non commercial research and development which qualifies for NHS support.
From 1 April 2000 the distribution of budget 2 funding to regional offices will be in proportion to the distribution of revenue allocations to health authorities.

NHS Trusts

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list his latest estimates and forecast expenditure in cash terms for the element of NHS trusts' charges to health authorities which trusts use to remunerate their debt to central Government for (i) 1997–98, (ii) 1998–99, (iii) 1999–2000, (iv) 2000–01 and (v) 2001–02. [68382]

Mr. Denham: The amounts included in health authorities' allocations to cover National Health Service trust debt remuneration are as follows:

Year	Amount (£)
1997–98[1]	1,206,750,000
1998–99[1]	1,236,110,000
1999–2000[1]	1,306,544,000
2000–01[2]	1,306,544,000
2001–02[2]	1,306,544,000

[1] Actual
[2] Forecast

Forde Park, Newton Abbot

Mr. Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if public immunity indemnity certificates have been signed in connection with Forde Park, Newton Abbot. [68864]

Mr. Hutton: No.

Mr. Duncan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what files his Department retains on individuals who attended Forde Park, Newton Abbot. [68865]

Mr. Hutton: None.

Smoking

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will publish the figures for the incidence of cigarette smoking among adults in 1998. [67399]

Ms Jowell: The Office for National Statistics plans to publish headline results from the 1998–99 General Household Survey (GHS) late this year. These will include figures for the prevalence of cigarette smoking among adults aged 16 and over in Great Britain.

It is also planned that the main report for the 1998–99 GHS will be published in February 2000, which will include more detailed analyses.

Telecommunications Base Stations

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into the biological effects of emissions from telecommunications base stations. [68343]

Ms Jowell: In 1996, the Committee on Medical Aspects of Radiation in the Environment (COMARE) evaluated an epidemiological study by the small area health statistics unit. This study, undertaken on behalf of this and five other Government Departments, investigated the incidence of leukaemia near 20 high power Television/FM transmitters in Great Britain. The study found that living close to a transmitter was not associated with an increased risk of leukaemia. In their statement—copies of which are available in the Library—COMARE reiterated their previous advice that is no firm evidence of a carcinogenic hazard from exposure to electromagnetic fields (EMF) from television and radio masts emissions.

The Department is currently contributing to the World Health Organisation International Electromagnetic Fields Project which includes health effects of electromagnetic fields and is funding studies investigating possible biological effects from EMF generally.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Domestic Gas

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the annual financial benefit to the average three-bedroomed household of using domestic gas for heating and hot water relative to other forms of heating. [68376]

Mr. Battle: The Building Research Establishment estimate that during a year of average weather, based on average energy prices over the period 1996–1998, the typical costs of using different fuels for heating and hot water are as follows:

Estimated average annual energy consumption and costs for heating and hot water: 3 bedroom semi detached house, United Kingdom

Fuel used	Energy consumed[1] GJ	Cost per year[2] £	Difference compared to gas £	Difference compared to gas Percentage
Gas[3,4]	100.5	452	—	—
Oil[3]	92.6	369	−84	−18
Solid fuel[3,5]	111.2	540	+88	+20
Electric off-peak[6]	67	630	+178	+39
Electric on-peak[7]	53.3	1,171	+719	+159

[1] Energy consumed for domestic heating and hot water during a year of average weather (based on weather over last 20 years). It is assumed in the model that all of the house is heated so that the living area reaches a temperature of 21° C, with the following heating pattern: weekdays 2 hours in the morning, 7 hours in the evening. Weekends 16 hours.
[2] Based on average fuel prices (including VAT) over the 3 years 1996–1998. Connection to mains electricity for other uses, such as appliances, has been assumed and the standing charge associated with this supply has therefore been excluded from the estimated costs. The figures reflect the overall efficiency of typical heating systems for each fuel (eg a standard gas or oil boiler with room thermostat or individual electric heaters with their own thermostats). More efficient systems are available for oil and gas, but not widely installed and they would obviously reduce energy consumption and the corresponding costs further.
[3] Central heating and hot water.
[4] Includes a standing charge for gas of £36 per year.
[5] Based on anthracite used in closed room heaters and radiators.
[6] Storage heating and hot water (dual immersion heater). The annual cost includes an additional standing charge for the off-peak tariff of £14 per year.
[7] Heating and hot water.
Source:
Building Research Establishment Domestic Energy Model (BREDEM)

It should be noted that these estimates do not take account of all the factors that are relevant to such comparisons. For example, the lower capital costs of on-peak electricity installation can allow investment in higher insulation levels.

Right Hon. Member for Hartlepool

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on what date the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) made the decision to have no involvement in the Department of Trade and Industry investigation into the dealings of the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson). [65637]

Mr. Byers: On 23 September 1998.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what papers relating to his Department's inquiry into dealings of the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson) were shown to the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson); [65636]

(2) on what date the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), withdrew from any involvement in or influence over investigations conducted by the Department of Trade and Industry into the dealings of the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West, (Mr. Robinson); [65638]

(3) whether the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), minuted the Permanent Secretary in order to record his decision to have no involvement in the inquiry into alleged accounting offences by Hollis Industries plc; [65596]

(4) by what means the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), informed the Permanent Secretary of his decision to have no involvement in the inquiry into alleged accounting offences by Hollis Industries plc. [65597]

Mr. Byers: The decision was taken in discussion with the Permanent Secretary at a meeting on 23 September 1998.

US–UK Import Tariffs

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what rates of tariff are currently applicable to United Kingdom imports of catering tableware from the United States of America, and of similar United Kingdom exports into the USA; what action he is taking to reduce the difference; and if he will make a statement. [68369]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 1 February 1999]:* The current customs tariffs on imports of catering tableware into the UK from the United States of America are 12 per cent. for articles of porcelain or china, and 5 per cent., 5.5 per cent. or 9 per cent. for articles other than porcelain or china. The US tariffs for similar products are 30 per cent. and 31.5 per cent. respectively. The UK is committed to further multilateral liberalisation of trade including significant reductions in US peak tariffs on catering tableware. The issue will be addressed as part of a comprehensive, cross-sectoral multilateral World Trade Organisation (WTO) negotiation on industrial tariffs. To date WTO member countries have still to commit themselves to such a negotiation. However, I am hopeful that the WTO Ministerial Conference in the USA next November will be able to agree on the need to make preparations for further multilateral negotiations on liberalising industrial tariffs. I do not, therefore, propose to make a statement.

End-of-life Vehicles

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the Government supported the amendment to the draft EU Directive on end-of-life vehicles which was approved at the Environment Council meeting on 21 December and which added £73 million extra annual costs on business. [68983]

Dr. Howells: Ministers reached only a preliminary view on the main issues of the Directive at the Environment Council meeting in December, and decisions on the Council's Common Position are expected to be taken at the Environment Council in March.

The latest update of the Regulatory Impact Assessment includes a provision for a specific recycling target for 2015. The previous RIA could not contain a figure for this provision because it was based on an unquantified target for 2015 which would have been set by review in 2005. The difference between the two figures should not therefore simply be regarded as an increase.

Company Rescue Mechanism

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will publish the terms of reference of the joint DTI/Treasury review of company rescue mechanisms announced in the recent Competitiveness White Paper. [69143]

Mr. Byers: The terms of reference of the review have now been agreed as follows:

To review aspects of company and insolvency law and practice in the United Kingdom and elsewhere relating to the opportunities for, and means by which, businesses can resolve short to medium term financial difficulties, so as to preserve maximum economic value; and to make recommendations.

The principal areas of focus for the review should be:

the further development of the rescue culture;

a re-assessment of the relative rights and remedies of secured and unsecured creditors in insolvencies to include the position of the Crown as a preferential creditor; and,

consideration of the duties of directors in relation to companies experiencing financial difficulties.

The Review will be led jointly by the Department of Trade and Industry (Insolvency Service) and HM Treasury and will seek and welcome views from all sources, particularly those with experience of business and business failure, from those who have studied company rescue regimes both in the UK and elsewhere and from those involved in the practice of rescuing companies, again both in the UK and elsewhere.

To ensure that its conclusions/recommendations can make an early contribution to debate in this area the Review Team will report to Ministers by the end of July 1999.

Officials from the Department of Trade and Industry, The Insolvency Service and HM Treasury will lead the review with contributions from a number of individuals from the academic, professional and business world.

Electro-shock Batons

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if companies granted export licences for the export of electro-shock batons between 1989 and 1994 had been granted the relevant licence under firearms legislation to *(a)* handle, *(b)* store, *(c)* distribute and *(d)* manufacture such weapons. [68192]

Mr. Boateng: I have been asked to reply.

Two of the four companies in question had authority to deal in weapons prohibited by section 5(1)(b) of the Firemans Act 1968, which would include electro-shock weapons as well as other types of weapons capable of discharging a noxious liquid, gas or other thing. The other two companies, one of which was the company granted the trans-shipment licence, did not have such authority.

The investigation of possible offences under the Firemans Acts is a matter for the police, who will consider whether there are grounds to bring criminal charges. The decision as to whether or not to prosecute in an individual case rests with the Crown Prosecution Service. The Home Office has no powers to intervene. However, information about the two companies that did not have authority to deal in prohibited weapons was forwarded by the Home Office to the relevant police forces for their consideration. I understand that, in both cases, the police have decided to take no further action.

Domestic Gas (Mains Connection)

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many households in the United Kingdom were not connected to the mains domestic gas supply in (i) 1994–95, (ii) 1995–96, (iii) 1996–97 and (iv) 1997–98. [68375]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 1 February 1999]:* I regret that this information is not available from official sources. Unofficial estimates suggest that some 6 million households in Great Britain may not be connected to mains gas supply, including premises where it would not be safe to install gas.

Digital Economy (Special Representative)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects to announce the name of the Government's Special Representative on the Digital Economy. [68167]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 1 February 1999]:* The selection process for the Special Representative on the Digital Economy is in hand, and we will announce the name of the successful candidate as soon as possible.

Export Controls

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what amount of money, underwritten by the ECGD for defence and other equipment entered in Part III of Schedule I to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994 has been claimed by manufacturers, but not recovered from the Governments of *(a)* Indonesia, *(b)* Jordan, *(c)* Kenya, *(d)* Egypt and *(e)* Algeria. [67897]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* ECGD does not categorise the sales of defence or other equipment which it supports by reference to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994.

I can however advise my hon. Friend that, on the basis of records available, the balance of claims paid by ECGD which are outstanding for recovery in respect of sales of defence and other equipment (including non-lethal goods and services) to defence buyers in the named countries currently stands at:-

£ million

Country	*Number*
(a) Indonesia	11
(b) Jordan	253
(c) Kenya	16
(d) Egypt	46
(e) Algeria	98

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what proportion of the amount of money underwritten by the ECGD for defence and other equipment entered in Part III of Schedule I to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994 claimed by manufacturers, but not recovered from the Governments of *(a)* Indonesia, *(b)* Jordan, *(c)* Kenya, *(d)* Egypt and *(e)* Algeria, has been outstanding for (i) five years or more, (ii) two to five years, (iii) one to two years, (iv) six months to one year and (v) less than six months. [67894]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* ECGD does not maintain its records on a basis which would enable it to answer this question other than at disproportionate cost.

Renewable Energy Sources

Mr. Gummer: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps the Government are taking to encourage electricity companies to supply electricity from renewable energy sources beyond their obligations under the Non Fossil Fuel Obligation. [67965]

Mr. Battle: In September last year, I announced the fifth and largest Order to date under the Non-Fossil Fuel Obligation (NFFO-5). Under that Order, the electricity supply companies in England and Wales contracted collectively with 261 projects with a combined capacity of 1,177 Mega Watts (MW).

I have also reversed the planned cuts in the renewable programme budget, so that the budget for this year (1998–99) has been maintained at £11 million. The programme supports both Research and Development (R&D) and market enablement projects. Of the latter, among the projects supported this year was the Renewable Generators Consortium (RGC), which brought together the majority of generators with contracts under NFFO-1 and NFFO-2—contracts which subsequently ended on 31 December 1998—in order to negotiate new, post-NFFO contracts collectively with the electricity supply companies.

Many of those generators, now trading successfully in the open electricity market, are supplying electricity companies which are either already offering or which are about to offer, green electricity tariffs or products of some kind. The programme has also been supporting work on accrediting such tariffs and I hope to see an accreditation scheme launched later this year, with substantial support from my Department.

We are also considering wider renewable policy as part of our review of renewable energy, the results of which I will announce shortly.

SMEs (Internet)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what publicity his Department has given to its internet web sites dedicated to Trade UK for small and medium-sized enterprises; and if he will list the web sites. [68463]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 1 February 1999]:* My Department is promoting the TradeUK internet service at www.tradeuk.com to two main audiences: first, as a service for UK exporters and potential exporters and, second, as a service for buyers abroad wishing to source goods and services from the UK. For the UK audience the main links to TradeUK now in place are via the Overseas Trade Services (www.dti.gov.uk/ots/) and Enterprise Zone (www.enterprisezone.org.uk) websites. We are also giving publicity to the TradeUK web site in its own right and working with other Departments, agencies and trade associations to develop reciprocal links to and from TradeUK. We are signposting foreign buyers to TradeUK from websites of British Embassies and Consulates around the world.

Intellectual Property Rights

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he is taking to ensure that the procedure for registering and protecting intellectual property rights for patents is harmonised across the European Union. [68551]

Dr. Howells: There is already substantial harmonisation of procedures for acquiring patent rights in Europe. Under the European Patent Convention (EPC), an intergovernmental agreement to which 19 European States belong (including the United Kingdom), applications can be filed with the European Patent Office. This offers a single procedure for obtaining patent rights. Applicants designate those States in which protection is required, and rights become valid in those States upon filing of a translation into their official languages.

Once validated in each designated State the system provides a bundle of national patents which have to be separately maintained and enforced under respective national laws.

Following consultation on its Green Paper on patents in Europe, the European Commission is expected to make a proposal for a Council Regulations for a Community patent providing a unitary right across the Member States. Costs of translation into official languages of all Member States and absence of harmonisation in post grant litigation could reduce the effectiveness of such a system. As stated in the Competitiveness White Paper, the Government will push for a Community patent which is affordable and easy to enforce.

Departmental Responsibilities

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what responsibilities which his Department had prior to the Comprehensive Spending Review are to be *(a)* discontinued by his Department, *(b)* transferred to another department, *(c)* transferred to an executive agency and *(d)* added to his Department over the period 1998–99 to 2001–02. [68395]

Mr. Byers: No responsibilities are to be discontinued, transferred or added over this period as a result of the Comprehensive Spending Review.

Departmental Legislation

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what additional legislation, not currently before Parliament, was assumed in the production of his Department's spending allocation for 1999–2000 to 2001–02 in the Comprehensive Spending Review. [68411]

Mr. Byers: There is a longstanding convention that legislative proposals for each year are not announced before the Queen's Speech at the start of the relevant Session.

Internal Market

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the determination by the Council of Ministers of the guidelines and conditions to be adopted by Member States and the Community in order to ensure balanced progress towards the internal market. [67934]

Mr. Wilson: The Vienna European Council on 11–12 December concluded that continued progress had been made to modernise, extend and simplify the Single Market, and welcomed the continued monitoring which the Commission would carry out through the Single Market Scoreboard. The Council also concluded that full and correct implementation of single market rules at national level was essential and that there were still some gaps in this which needed to be corrected without delay.

The Internal Market Council was asked to produce a report on the working of Single Market, and proposing further action on a number of priorities.

The Austrian and German Presidencies have been taking forward the important agenda of work in economic reform of product and capital markets to enhance competitiveness, economic growth and employment in which my noble Friend the Minister for Trade and Competitiveness in Europe has played a very active role.

Regional Aid

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what change in the proportion of the working population covered by assisted areas status is now anticipated under the European guidelines on regional aid published in March 1998. [66151]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 18 January 1999]:* The European Commission has stated that up to 28.7 per cent. of the UK's population may be covered by areas eligible for regional aid under Articles 92(3)a and 92(3)c of the EC Treaty.

Lucas Varity

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the bid by a US company for Lucas Varity and its potential effects on the West Midlands. [68522]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 1 February 1999]:* In the first instance it would be necessary to determine whether any proposed acquisition fell for consideration by the

European Commission under the EC Merger Regulation, or by the UK authorities under the Fair Trading Act 1973. If a proposed acquisition fell to the EC Merger Regulation, it would be for the parties to notify it to the European Commission. If it fell to the UK authorities, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry would decide whether or not to refer it to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission in the light of the advice of the Director General of Fair Trading. Each case is considered on its own merits.

Renewable Energy Advisory Committee

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the *(a)* role, *(b)* recent work and *(c)* membership of the Renewable Energy Advisory Committee. [68855]

Mr. Battle: The terms of reference of the Renewable Energy Advisory Committee (REAC) are:

to advise the Head of Energy Technologies Directorate (ENT), DTI on the aims, content, environmental appropriateness and economic applicability of the Department's market enablement programme and policy on new and renewable energy;

to advise on the merits, relative priorities and value for money of those proposed projects within the above programme that the Head of ENT may place before it;

to take particular responsibility for advice on strategic and other pan-technology issues associated with the development of new and renewable energy sources;

to monitor and review the programme's progress against the DTI's agreed plans, and to evaluate the programme's effectiveness in achieving its agreed objectives; and to provide advice on such other matters as may be required.

At its meeting on 20 January 1999 REAC discussed:

the renewable energy programme;

the Non-Fossil Fuel Obligation and my Department's recent consultation exercise on offshore wind; and new Cabinet Office guidance on Non-Departmental Public Bodies.

Members of REAC

Mr. G. Bevan, ENT, DTI—Chairman
Dr. G. J. K. Acres, Johnson Matthey Technology Centre (retired)
Mr. J. Boags, Bank of Scotland
Mr. R. Booth, Consultant
Ms A. Cook OBE, Neighbourhood Energy Action
Mr. G. Leach, Stockholm Environment Institute
Prof. P. O'Sullivan, University College London
Mr. J. Parry, Chief Planning Officer, Shropshire County Council
Mr. D. Porter, Association of Electricity Producers
Mr. D. Shah, BP Exploration
Mr. M. Trinick, Bond Pearce Solicitors
Dr. G. Walker, CCLRC
Mr. H. West, Hyder Industrial Ltd
Mr. J. P. White, NORWEB
Mr. J. Worth, Countryside Commission.

In addition, a number of central Government officials attend REAC meetings in their official capacity, together with representatives of DTI's programme management contractor.

Cashmere Goods

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received from UK businesses in respect of the US Government proposal to impose tariffs on UK cashmere goods; what was the total value of UK cashmere goods exported *(a)* in total and *(b)* to the US in the last year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [68172]

Mr. Wilson: I met with a delegation of manufacturers of Cashmere products led by the hon. Members for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) and for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale (Mr. Moore) on 20 January. I share their concerns on this issue. I have also had representation from companies involved in the cashmere industry, throughout the UK.

Based on statistics published by US International Trade Commission, UK exports of cashmere goods to the US were approximately £17.5 million in 1997. There is no UK tariff heading directly equivalent to this particular US tariff code. However, UK Customs and Excise data indicate that UK exports to the US of cashmere sweaters under the most closely corresponding UK tariff codes (61101035 and 61101095) were £3.2 million in 1997. Total UK exports of cashmere sweaters under these codes were £30.8 million.

Tidal Energy

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if provision for the support of electricity generation from tidal energy sources will be included in his next scheme for non-fossil fuel obligations. [68827]

Mr. Battle: What further measures the Government might introduce to encourage electricity generation from renewable energy sources is an issue being considered as part of the current policy review on renewable energy, in which tidal energy sources are included.

SCOTLAND

Ethnic Monitoring

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to include Irish as a category in his Department's ethnic monitoring of staff recruitment. [63876]

Mr. Dewar *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* The over-riding principle of Civil Service recruitment procedures is that they should be fair, and selection should be on merit at each stage.

Monitoring in this area is based on ethnic origin and not nationality. The nine ethnic minority origin categories monitored by my Department are based on those used in the 1991 census, which did not include an Irish category. They will be reviewed in the light of any suggested changes for the 2001 census.

Broadcasting

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what parts of the Representation of the People Acts apply to the Scottish Parliament elections for the purpose of broadcasting in Scotland; and if he will make a statement. [66180]

Mr. McLeish *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* The conduct of elections for the Scottish Parliament will be governed by an Order which will be made under section

12(1) of the Scotland Act, which will be laid before the House next month. In relation to broadcasting, we intend that the Order will make similar provision to section 92 of the Representation of the People Act 1983. We are currently seeking comments on whether or not a provision modelled on section 93 of that Act should also be included.

Waiting Lists (Orthodontic Treatment)

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list *(a)* the size of the waiting list and *(b)* the average waiting time for orthodontic treatment in each health board area in Scotland; and if he will make a statement. [66607]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 20 January 1999]:* Most orthodontic treatments carried out within the Hospital and Community Health Service settings are undertaken on an outpatient basis. The latest available information on the mean waiting time for a first orthodontic outpatient appointment, by area of residence, is given in the table. Information on the number of patients waiting for outpatient appointments on a given date is not collected centrally.

A major proportion of orthodontic treatment is undertaken in general dental practice, rather than in hospitals or the Community Health Service and no information is held centrally on patient waiting times for such treatment.

From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

NHS in Scotland: mean waiting times for a first orthodontic outpatient appointment during year ended 30 September 1998 [1] *by area of residence* [2]

Area of residence	*Mean wait (days)*
Argyll and Clyde	146
Ayrshire and Arran	65
Borders	130
Dumfries and Galloway	93
Fife	127
Forth Valley	56
Grampian	170
Greater Glasgow	100
Highland	194
Lanarkshire	98
Lothian	94
Tayside	85
Western Isles	293

[1] Provisional

[2] A consultant orthodontist from the mainland visits Orkney and Shetland on a regular basis to hold first outpatient consultation clinics. Patients are seen at the first clinic following GP/GDP referral.

Source:
ISD, Scotland

Red Squirrel Conservation

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if, when he last met officials of the Forestry Commission, they discussed matters relating to the Red Squirrel Biodiversity Action Plan and Forest Enterprise's national plan for red squirrel conservation; and if he will make a statement. [66994]

Mr. Macdonald *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* My right hon. Friend has not discussed these matters with officials of the Forestry Commission. However, as part of Red Squirrel Week in September last year, my hon. Friend the Minister with responsibility for fisheries and the countryside at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food launched the Forestry Commission's Practice Note on Red Squirrel Conservation. The Practice Note offers advice to woodland managers and conservationists which is based on the latest scientific research. It was prepared on behalf of the UK Red Squirrel Group which is the lead partner for the Red Squirrel Species Action Plan under the UK Biodiversity Action Plan.

Ceulan Forest

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, pursuant to his answer on 16 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *582*, on woodland areas, if the Ceulan forest has been offered for sale; and if he will make a statement. [68152]

Mr. Macdonald: The subject of the question relates to matters undertaken by Forest Enterprise. I have asked its Chief Executive, Dr. Bob McIntosh, to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Bob McIntosh to Mr. Christopher Gill, dated 2 February 1999:

The Secretary of State for Scotland has asked me to reply to your Question No 68152 asking if Esgair Ceulan (Ceulan Forest) has been offered for sale.

Ceulan Forest was offered for sale on the open market on 4 November 1998 through local agents, Strutt & Parker. A closing date of 15 December was set, four offers were received and the highest was accepted. The matter is in the hands of the Commission's lawyers and completion is expected by the end of March.

The wood has a number of public footpaths and bridleways but you will be pleased to learn that a Public Access Agreement has been signed with Powys County Council. Public access to the whole wood will therefore be protected after the sale is completed.

I hope this answers your question.

Research and Development

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the research and development expenditure by *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the NHS, indicating separately that on health technology assessment in each year since 1992. [68208]

Mr. Galbraith: The Chief Scientist Office (CSO) within The Scottish Office Department of Health (SODoH) has responsibility for managing funds which support research activity to further the development of patient care and health services within the NHS in Scotland. CSO expenditure on research and development (R&D) for each year since 1992–93 is given in column *(a)* of the following table. CSO R&D expenditure on health technology assessment cannot be identified separately for each year since 1992–93 except at disproportionate cost. For 1998–99, it is expected to be about £1.9 million.

Up to and including 1995–96, Additional Cost of Teaching (ACT) was an element of the SODoH revenue allocations to Health Boards to protect the NHS support for both clinical teaching and clinical research costs. It is not possible to identify NHS R&D expenditure separately

until 1996–97, when those within the NHS who were delivering R&D support services were invited to bid for costs incurred from the R&D Support Fund. NHS expenditure on R&D since 1996–97 is shown in column *(b)* of the following table.

Under the R&D Support Fund bidding procedure, bidders are asked to identify research activity areas, but these may be broad and encompass a range of subjects. It is not possible therefore to identify separately NHS R&D expenditure on health technology assessment except at disproportionate cost. From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Research and development expenditure in Scotland

£ million

	(a) SODoH: CSO	*(b) NHS*
1992–93	8.9	Not available[1]
1993–94	10.6	—
1994–95	10.1	—
1995–96	10.7	—
1996–97	10.6	24.0
1997–98	9.9	28.0
1998–99	11.0[2]	28.5[2]

[1] Additional Cost of Teaching (ACT) up to and including 1995–96 encompassed both clinical teaching and clinical research costs (no breakdown available)

[2] Estimate

Skye Bridge

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will state, in respect of the original advice given by the Crown Office to the Procurator Fiscal in Dingwall over proceeding with criminal prosecutions of those people refusing to pay the Skye Bridge tolls, on what date the Procurator Fiscal requested the advice; on what date the advice was tendered; by what means; who signed the communication; and if he will make a statement. [68339]

Mr. McLeish *[holding answer 1 February 1999]:* I am informed by my noble and learned Friend the Lord Advocate that the Procurator Fiscal at Dingwell first wrote to the Crown Office on 17 and 26 October 1995 in connection with possible criminal proceedings against persons refusing to pay tolls on the Skye Bridge. The Deputy Crown Agent replied on 6 November conveying the Lord Advocate's instructions that the Procurator Fiscal should carry out further work before seeking instructions from Crown Counsel on whether to take proceedings.

Thereafter there was further correspondence between the Procurator Fiscal and the Crown Office which culminated in the Deputy Crown Agent writing to the Procurator Fiscal on 5 January 1996 conveying the instructions of the then Lord Advocate about proceedings.

The hon. Gentlemen will recall that, in a written answer of 16 January 1996, *Official Report*, column *546*, he was advised that the Procurator Fiscal had been instructed by the Lord Advocate to institute criminal proceedings in respect of all instances where this was a sufficiency of evidence and the charges were then in course of preparation.

From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

General Affairs Council (Brussels)

Mr. Jim Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the outcome of the General Affairs Council held in Brussels on 25 and 26 January; and if he will make a statement. [68321]

Ms Quin: 1. The General Affairs Council in Brussels on 25 January 1999 adopted the A points listed in document 5416/98 and noted the resolutions, decisions and opinions adopted by the European Parliament in its sessions of 2–3 December and 14–18 December listed in documents 12779/98 and 14011/98. Copies of the documents listing the A points and resolutions will be placed in the House Libraries as soon as they become available.

2. The Council began with the debate on the Presidency programme, introduced by the German Foreign Minister.

3. On Agenda 2000, the Council agreed (subject to agreement on the final package) two points of detail on the Structural Funds. First, it agreed a lower performance reserve (sometimes referred to as the efficiency reserve) than that proposed by the Commission and that Member States (rather than the Commission) should have the right to allocate these funds in accordance with their own criteria and circumstances. Second, it was agreed that it was not necessary for areas designated to receive State Aids (under Article 92(3)(c) to correspond exactly with areas receiving Structural Funds, although Member States should aim to increase the level of convergence. The Council discussed the importance of achieving worthwhile CAP reform within the limits of available financial resources.

4. The German Presidency then set out its work programme on EU enlargement. Two Deputy level accession conferences (19 April; 19 May) and a Ministerial level meeting (22 June) will be held. The Presidency plans to open negotiations on a further eight chapters, bringing the number of chapters open to a total of 15 out of 31 by the end of the Presidency.

5. The Council noted the agenda for the EU/Russia summit on 18 February in Moscow and agreed to the Foreign Secretary's proposal that it should include nuclear waste.

6. On Iraq, the Council considered developments in the UN Security Council and discussed a possible EU initiative aimed at enhancing the role of the EU in efforts to improve the humanitarian situation in Iraq.

7. On Kosovo, the Council expressed outrage at the massacre of civilians in Racak and recalled the message which the EU had delivered to President Milosevic. It also condemned UCK provocations. It welcomed the results of the Contact Group meeting in London on 22 January, in particular the goal of early negotiations on a political solution, following a meeting of the Contact Group at Ministerial level, to be held as soon as possible. It repeated its support for the work of Ambassadors Hill and Petritsch towards a negotiated settlement, and for the KVM. It agreed that officials should step up work on strengthening sanctions, including measures to stop the flow of money and weapons to Kosovo armed groups. It

stressed the importance of the Kosovo Albanian leadership forming a fully representative negotiating team. It also recalled the role which the EU was ready to play in support of a future political solution, including through reconstruction. It extended the mandate of Mr. Felipe Gonzalez as EU Special Representative for the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia; and adopted a Regulation exempting Montenegro Airlines from the JAT flight ban.

8. On Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Council welcomed the outcome of the Madrid Peace Implementation; reiterated its full support for the High Representative Mr. Carlos Westendorp; and urged the formation of a new Government in Republika Srpska, determined to comply with the Dayton agreement.

9. On Albania, the Council welcomed the recent meeting between Prime Minister Majko and leader of the Democratic Party (DP), Berisha. The Council condemned the DP's continued boycott of parliament. The Council urged Albania to contribute to the efforts of the international community to bring the parties to the conflict on Kosovo to the negotiating table.

10. Ministers endorsed and mandated follow-up action on the operational points contained in the EU's human rights declaration of 10 December. This enables work to begin on the Anglo-German initiative of an annual EU Human Rights Report. The report will bring to public attention the EU's activities to promote human rights worldwide.

11. The Presidency briefed the Council on the forthcoming visit to the Middle East by Foreign Minister Fischer, accompanied by the EU Special Envoy to the Middle East, Miguel Moratinos.

12. There was no consensus on a proposal by the Presidency to adopt the Code of Conduct on Arms Exports as a Common Position under Article J.2 of the TEU.

13. The Council reiterated its support for the democratically elected Government of Sierra Leone. It reiterated that the existing Common Position does not prevent the supply outside Nigeria of military equipment for ECOMOG, and agreed that the scope for further facilitating peacekeeping efforts should be examined.

Afghanistan

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the United Kingdom will continue to impose an arms embargo on Afghanistan in line with the EU's Common Position of 17 December 1996. [69080]

Mr. Fatchett: We remain committed to the EU arms embargo against Afghanistan which the UK interprets as covering all goods and technology entered on Part III to Schedule 1 to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, as amended.

Following consultations with this Department and the Ministry of Defence, the Department of Trade and Industry recently issued a licence for the export of mine clearance equipment for use by the Halo Trust to aid their demining activities in Afghanistan. The grant of this licence is for humanitarian purposes, and falls outside the scope of the embargo.

Council of the European Union

Mr. Pendry: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the forthcoming business in the Council of the European Union for February and the major European Union events for the next six months. [69081]

Ms Quin: The information is as follows:

Monthly forecast of business: February 1999

	City/town	*Business/event*
4–6	Bonn	Ministers for Labour and Social Affairs (Informal)
8	Brussels	ECOFIN
8–9	Dakar	EU/ACP Ministerial
8–12	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
11–12	Berlin	Ministers for Justice and Home Affairs (Informal)
22	Brussels	Political Committee
22–23	Brussels	General Affairs Council
22–23	Brussels	Agriculture Council
24–25	Brussels	European Parliament Plenary
25	Brussels	Internal Market
26	Petersburg	Informal meeting of the Heads of State and Government

The following subjects are likely to be discussed:

February 4–6 Ministers for Labour/Social Affairs (Informal)

No formal agenda

February 8 ECOFIN

Stability and growth pact: examination of stability and convergence programmes

Economic situation and policy in the Community (Policy debate on macro-economic and structural policy issues)

AGENDA 2000
- Financial framework
- Interinstitutional agreement
- Report on own resources

February 8–9 EU/ACP Ministerial

Ministerial negotiations on the Lomé convention

February 8–12 European Parliament Plenary

No agenda yet available

February 11–12 Ministers for Justice and Home Affairs (Informal)

No formal agenda

February 22–23 General Affairs Council

Agenda 2000

Enlargement

Amsterdam treaty

Report from the Council General Secretariat on the Council's operating procedure in the light of an enlarged Union

Slovenia
- preparation of the 1st Association Council (poss. "A" item)

Latvia
- preparation of the 1st Association Council (poss. "A" point)

Lithuania
- preparation of the 1st Association Council (poss. "A" point)

Human Rights

Western Balkans

EU-Pakistan
- Cooperation agreement (poss. "A" item)

Middle East Peace process

Great Lakes

February 22–23 Agriculture Council

No agenda yet available

February 24–25 European Parliament Plenary

No agenda yet available

February 25 Internal Market Council

No agenda yet available

February 26 Informal Meeting of Heads of State and Government

No formal agenda expected but likely to focus on Agenda 2000

European Calendar: February-July 1999

This calendar is primarily concerned with European Union matters, but certain other relevant events are also included. Events and dates quoted are based on the information available on the date of issue.

1999	*City/town*	*Event*
February		
4–6	Bonn	Ministers for Labour and Social Affairs (Informal)
8	Brussels	ECOFIN
8–9	Dakar	EU/ACP Ministerial
8–12	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
11–12	Berlin	Minister for Justice and Home Affairs (Informal)
22	Brussels	Political Committee
22–23	Brussels	General Affairs Council
22–23	Brussels	Agriculture Council
24–25	Brussels	European Parliament Plenary
25	Brussels	Internal Market
26	Petersburg	Informal Meeting of Heads of State and Government
March		
2	Brussels	Youth Council (possible)
8–12	Strasbourg	European Parliament Plenary
9	Brussels	Social Affairs Council
11–12	Brussels	Environment Council
12	Brussels	Justice and Home Affairs Council
13–14	Reinhartshausen	Foreign Ministers (Informal)
15	Brussels	ECOFIN
15–16	Brussels	Agriculture Council
18	Brussels	Education Council (possible)
22	Brussels	Political Committee
22–23	Brussels	General Affairs Council
24–25	Berlin	Special European Council
29	Brussels	Transport Council
29–30	Berlin	Asia-European Foreign Ministers
30	Brussels	Fisheries Council
April		
13	Luxembourg	Consumer Affairs Council
15–16	Stuttgart	Euro-Med Foreign Ministers Conference "Barcelona III"
16–18	Dresden	ECOFIN (Informal)
19–20	Luxembourg	Agriculture Council
22	Luxembourg	Telecommunications Council
23–25	Mecklenburg	Environment Ministers (Informal)
24–25	Luxembourg	NATO Summit
26–27	Luxembourg	General Affairs Council
29	Luxembourg	Industry Council
May		
6	Brussels	EU-ACP Ministerial meeting
7–9	Brussels	Environment Council (Informal)
10	Brussels	ECOFIN
10	Bremen	WEU Council
10–11	Berlin	Trade Ministers (Informal)
11	Brussels	Energy Council
17–18	Brussels	General Affairs Council
17–18	Brussels	Agriculture Council
18	Brussels	EEA Council
18	Brussels	Co-operation Council with Russia
18–19	Weimar	Culture Ministers (Informal)
20	Brussels	Research Council
21	Brussels	Development Council
25	Brussels	Joint ECOFIN and Labour and Social Affairs Council
25	Brussels	Social Affairs Council
27	Brussels	Youth Council
27–28	Brussels	Justice and Home Affairs Council
31	Brussels	General Affairs Council
30 May—1 June	Dresden	Agriculture Ministers (Informal)
June		
1	Dresden	Agriculture Ministers (Informal)
3–4	Cologne	European Council
7	Luxembourg	Education Council
8	Luxembourg	Health Council
10	Luxembourg	Fisheries Council
14	Luxembourg	ECOFIN (possible)
14–15	Luxembourg	Agriculture Council
17	Bonn	EU-Japan Summit
17–18	Luxembourg	Transport Council
18–20	Cologne	G8
21	Luxembourg	Internal Market
21	Bonn	EU-USA/Canada Summit
21–22	Luxembourg	General Affairs Council
22	Luxembourg	Labour and Social Affairs Council (possible)
24–25	Luxembourg	Environment Council
28	Luxembourg	Culture Council
July		
2–3	Oulu	Industry and Research Ministers (Informal)
9–10	Oulu	Labour/Social Affairs Ministers (Informal)
12	Brussels	ECOFIN
16	Brussels	Budget
16–18	Helsinki	Environment Ministers (Informal)
18–20	Savonlinna	Culture/Audiovisual Ministers (Informal)
19–20	Brussels	Agriculture

UNHCR (Land Rovers)

Mr. Pendry: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about the proposed export of two armoured Land Rovers to the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Belgrade in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. [69082]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We have granted a licence for the export to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) of two armoured vehicles based on the Land Rover Defender 110 for use by UNHCR personnel. Given the key humanitarian role played by the UNHCR in the FRY, and the obvious need for the UNHCR to be able to protect staff serving with its office in Belgrade, including against land mines, we were glad to be able to approve this licence. The UN Sanctions Committee appointed under UNSCR 1160 has raised no objection to it.

Bosnia (Ballistic Undervest Export)

Mr. Rogers: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about the proposed export of a ballistic undervest to the European Community Monitoring Mission in Bosnia. [69083]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We have granted a licence for the export to Bosnia of a ballistic undervest for use by the

Paymaster General at the European Community Monitoring Mission (ECMM) in Sarajevo. We were glad to approve this export licence in view of the obvious need for the ECMM to be able to protect its staff involved in international peace-keeping activities in the former Yugoslavia.

Cornish Language

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is his policy on the future of the Cornish language in relation the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. [68636]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The position of the Cornish language in relation to the Council of Europe's European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages has yet to be decided. It is a matter of domestic rather than foreign policy.

EU Languages

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many and what percentage of EU citizens speak English as their first language; and how many and what percentage of EU citizens have been taught or have an elementary command of the English language. [67431]

Ms Quin: According to the Eurobarometer survey, in November 1995 approximately 16–17 per cent. of EU citizens regarded English as their mother tongue. The same survey also shows that one EU citizen in three (of those who do not class English as their mother tongue) regarded themselves as able to hold a conversation in English. EUROSTAT's 1997 figures on foreign language teaching in the EU show that 26 per cent. of pupils in primary education and 90 per cent. of pupils in secondary school were taught English.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the recognised and minority languages of the EU in order of their estimated number of speakers. [67432]

Ms Quin: There is no system for formally recognising languages within the EU, beyond the 12 languages used for official business. A report prepared for the European Commission identified over 30 minority languages spoken within the EU. These are:

Language group	*Cluster/rank*	*Size*	*Economic diversity*	*In-migration*	*Core-periphery*	*Heartland*
German—New Belgium	A/1	68,000	High	Low	Core	No
Luxembourgish	A/2	350,000	High	High	Core	Yes
Catalan	A/2	4,065,000	High	High	Core	Yes
German (It)	A/4	290,000	Medium	Low	Semi	No
Galician	B/5	2,420,000	Medium	Low	Periphery	Yes
German (Fr)	B/6	1,800,000	High	Medium	Core	No
Catalan (Valencia)	B/6	1,909,000	High	High	Semi	No
Basque (BAC)	B/6	544,000	High	High	Semi	Yes
Ladin	B/6	56,000	Low	Low	Periphery	Yes
Occitan (Sp)	B/10	3,700	Low	Low	Periphery	No
Welsh	B/10	508,000	High	High	Semi	Yes
Catalan (Is Balearic)	B/12	428,000	Medium	High	Semi	No
Irish	C/13	1,095,000	High	Low	Periphery	Yes
Gaelic	C/13	59,000	Low	Low	Periphery	Yes
Frisian	C/13	400,000	High	High	Semi	Yes
Slovenian	C/13	85,000	Medium	High	Semi	No
Frilulan	C/13	400,000	Medium	Medium	Semi	Yes
Sorbian	C/18	50,000	Low	High	Periphery	Yes
Danish (Ger)	C/18	25,000	Low	Low	Semi	No
French (It)	C18	50,000	Medium	High	Semi	No
Basque (Navare)	C/18	53,000	Medium	Low	Semi	No
German (Denmark)	C/22	15–20,000	Low	Low	Semi	No
Catalan (Aragon)	C/24	48,000	Low	Low	Periphery	No
Catalan (Fr)	C/24	150,000	Medium	High	Semi	No
Turkish	C/24	100,000	Low	Low	Periphery	No
Basque (Fr)	D/26	86,000	Medium	High	Semi	No
Corsican	D/26	125,000	Medium	High	Periphery	Yes
Catalan (It)	D/28	15,000	Medium	High	Periphery	No
Occitan (It)	D/28	35–80,000	Low	Low	Periphery	No
German (Old Belg.)	D/30	42,000	Medium	Low	Semi	No
Occitan	D/30	2,100,000	High	Medium	Semi	Yes
Breton	D/30	180–250,000	Medium	Low	Semi	Yes
Albanian (It)	D/30	80–135,000	Low	Low	Periphery	No
Mirandes	E/34	15,000	Low	Low	Periphery	No
N. Frisian	E/35	9,000	Medium	Medium	Semi	No
Croatian (It)	E/35	1,700	Medium	Medium	Semi	No
Irish (UK)	E/37	142,000	Medium	Low	Periphery	No
Berber	E/38	25,000	Medium	Low	Periphery	No
Slavo-Macedonian	E/38	75,000	Low	Low	Periphery	No
Dutch (Fr)	E/38	20–40,000	Medium	Low	Core	No
Bulgarian	E/38	30,000	Low	Low	Periphery	No
E. Frisian	E/42	2,000	Medium	Low	Semi	No
Sardinian	E/42	1,300,000	Medium	Medium	Periphery	Yes
Portuguese (Sp)	E/44	3,600	Low	Low	Periphery	No

Language group	Cluster/rank	Size	Economic diversity	In-migration	Core-periphery	Heartland
Albanian (Gr)	E/44	'80,000	Low	Low	Periphery	No
Aroumanian	E/44	'50,000	Low	Low	Periphery	No
Cornish	E/47	1,000	Medium	High	Semi	Yes
Greek (It)	E/47	7,500	Low	Low	Periphery	No

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Direct Voting Elections

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to seek changes to EC law to permit amendment of Annex II of the 1976 legislative measure of the EEC on direct voting elections by majority. [68729]

Ms Quin: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave on 26 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *214*.

Kosovo

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the principal points of agreement of *(a)* the Contact Group-endorsed framework document and *(b)* the Holbrooke Package for Kosovo; if he will make a statement on progress towards the full implementation of each point; and if he will place copies of the documents in the Library. [67433]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: As the statement issued at the end of the Contact Group Ministerial meeting in London on 29 January made clear, the Contact Group framework document is being further refined in advance of the planned meeting at Rambouillet. Putting the text as it stands into the public domain at this time would not help the search for a political settlement in Kosovo.

Copies of the agreements with the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia for the setting up of the OSCE ground verification mission and the NATO air verification mission have already been placed in the House Library. It is for NATO and the OSCE to assess compliance with these agreements and with the relevant Security Council Resolutions. To date, neither side is in full compliance.

My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary reported to the House on 1 February 1999, *Official Report*, columns 597–608, on the latest moves towards a negotiated settlement following the 29 January Contact Group meeting.

Chile

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will deposit in the Library a copy of the four reports dispatched by the British Embassy in Madrid to his Department relating to Judge Garzon's investigations into Chile. [67956]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: No. The four reports dispatched by the British Embassy in Madrid relating to Judge Garzon's investigation into Chile were internal communications between the Embassy and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and also covered wider issues. On the specific question of Judge Garzon's investigations into Chile the reports were as follows:

12 November 1997: in the context of reporting developments in the case of Adolfo Scilingo a reference to the fact that Garzon's next step might be to issue warrants against Chileans (unnamed).

23 January 1998: a further report on actions against Scilingo, where the Public Prosecutor of the Audiencia Nacional had ordered Garzon to close the file. The report mentioned that investigations of Chileans, including Pinochet, continued.

15 October 1998: a report indicating that Garzon wished the Commission Rogatoire to be processed quickly and that what he had in mind was issuing an international arrest warrant. The report says nothing on timing of the warrant.

16 October 1998: a comment on the previous day's report, clarifying that the intention was possibly to issue a warrant while Pinochet was in the UK, but without specifying timing.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Pupil Registration Regulations

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to amend the Pupil Registration Regulations; and if he will make a statement. [68624]

Ms Estelle Morris: My right hon. Friend has no immediate plans to amend the regulations. Advice on registration issues is however included in our new guidance on "Social Inclusion: Pupil Support", which was issued for consultation on 22 January 1999. We shall of course consider the case for any amendments in the context of responses to that document.

Departmental Spending

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will *(a)* account for the difference between outturn departmental spending in Table A1 of the Comprehensive Spending Review and outturn departmental spending in Table 1.2 of the 1998–99 Public Expenditure Statistical Analysis for his Department for (i) 1993–94, (ii) 1994–95, (iii) 1995–96 and (iv) 1996–97 and *(b)* provide forecast figures for departmental spending for his Department in (1) 1997–98, (2) 1998–99, (3) 1999–2000, (4) 2000–01 and (5) 2001–02 on a comparable basis to Table 1.2 of the 1998–99 Public Expenditure Statistical Analysis. [68380]

Mr. Mudie: The figures in Table 1.2 in the Public Expenditure Statistical Analysis relating to DfEE include net lending to students but exclude subsidy payments and an element for bad debt. The equivalent figures in Table A1 of the Comprehensive Spending Review White paper exclude net lending to students but include subsidy payments and an element for bad debt.

It is not possible to provide forecast figures for departmental spending for DfEE for 1998–99, 1999–2000, 2000–01 and 2001–02 on a comparable basis to Table 1.2 of the 1998–99 Public Expenditure Statistical Analysis. The data in PESA give each Department's Control Total for the years in question. That method of controlling expenditure has been replaced with Departmental Expenditure Limits. Control Total data and Departmental Expenditure Limits data are not comparable. With that caveat, the information requested is shown in the following table:

DfEE Spending plans

Year	*£ million*
1997–98[1]	14,622
1998–99[2]	14,166
1999–2000[2]	15,473
2000–01[2]	17,295
2001–02[2]	18,612

[1] estimated outturn
[2] plans
Note:
1 The figure for 1997–98 is the Control Total for DfEE in Table 1.2 of the Public Expenditure Statistical Analysis 1998–99.
2 The figures for other years are the Department's Expenditure Limits in Table 6.1 of the Comprehensive Spending Review White Paper, Cm 4011.

TECs (North-east)

Mr. Cummings: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the cash balances held by each of the training and enterprise councils in the north-east Region, as at December 1998. [68317]

Mr. Mudie: The following table provides the cash balances held by each of the Training and Enterprise Councils in the north-east as at March 1998. Information as at December 1998 is not available.

£

TEC	*Cash balance as at March 1998*
County Durham	8,919,543
Northumberland	3,145,209
Tees Valley	8,101,000
Tyneside	6,696,000
Sunderland City	3,357,671
Total	30,219,423

Disability Rights Commission

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 11 January 1999, *Official Report*, column 97, if he will set out his Department's estimate of the associated costs of the proposals for the Disability Rights Commission to undertake *(a)* working towards the elimination of discrimination against disabled persons, *(b)* promoting the equalisation of opportunities for disabled persons in all fields of activity and *(c)* reviewing the working of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. [68532]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 1 February 1999]:* A provisional annual allocation of £11 million has been made for the Disability Rights Commission (DRC) in 2000–01 and 2001–02. It will be for the Commission when it is established to decide how to allocate its resources. Meanwhile interim estimates indicate some 10 per cent. of that annual budget may be devoted to administrative costs; 40 per cent. to advice and information, conciliation, assistance to individuals and formal investigations; 30 per cent. to promotional work, and 20 per cent. to policy work. Estimates are not available in the precise form requested by the hon. Member.

The Government will keep the annual allocations under view in the light of operational experience of the Commission.

Hospitality Industry

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many New Deal places have been offered by the United Kingdom hospitality industry; and how many have been taken up. [68862]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Richard Foster to Mr. Peter Ainsworth, dated 2 February 1999:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has asked Leigh Lewis to reply direct to your question regarding the number of New Deal places offered by the United Kingdom hospitality industry; and how many have been taken up. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to Mr. Lewis as Chief Executive of the Agency. I am replying in his absence.

Up to the end of December some 57,000 young people between the ages of 18 and 24 had entered jobs after having started the New Deal. Of these the available data indicates that around 8 per cent. had entered jobs in the hospitality sector. No similar information is available specifically in respect of job offers or, as yet in relation to entrants to job under the New Deal for those aged over 25 and for lone parents.

I hope this is helpful.

Highcliffe School

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his oral statement of 27 January 1999, *Official Report*, column 307, on Highcliffe School, what is the basis of the calculation that Dorset has been allocated a 7.3 per cent. increase in standard spending assessment for education in 1999–2000; and if he will express the increased allocation as a percentage per pupil. [68990]

Ms Estelle Morris: Dorset's provisional education standard spending assessment for 1999–2000 represents an underlying increase of £9.2 million or 7.3 per cent.. These figures illustrate the effect of allowing for local authority changes of function and taking account of new arrangements for funding music and student support. The allocation represents a year-on-year increase in overall education SSA funding per pupil of 4.3 per cent..

Millennium Compliance

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many millennium bug-busters have successfully completed their training to date. [68727]

Mr. Mudie: The latest figures show that 8,916 trainees have started Bug Buster courses, and of these 7,209 have completed. A further 9,011 are booked.

Education Action Zones

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidelines his Department has issued on the calculation of the value of gifts in kind donated by businesses to Education Action Zones. [68937]

Ms Estelle Morris: We issued guidance in September 1998, and supplemented this in January 1999. I have placed copies of the guidance in the Library.

Teacher Training

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the targets set by his Department for the number of students entering teacher training in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000, by phase. [68936]

Ms Estelle Morris: The following table shows the target intake to initial teacher training for the years 1997–98 to 1999–2000, by phase.

Target recruitment to initial teacher training (ITT) courses in England, 1997–98 to 1999–2000

	Primary	*Secondary*	*Total*
1997–98	11,050	19,500	30,550
1998–99	11,500	19,100	30,600
1999–2000	12,000	17,210	29,210

Source:
DfEE

Infant Class Sizes

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the effects of his decision to cap the amount allowed per teacher in local education authority bids to reduce infant class sizes on *(a)* employment of classroom assistants and *(b)* junior class sizes. [68813]

Ms Estelle Morris: We have made it clear that we will provide sufficient funding to enable all LEAs to reduce class sizes without adversely affecting the employment of classroom assistants or the size of junior classes.

Employment Service (Commercial Agency Vacancies)

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what is his Department's policy on the acceptance by the Employment Service of job vacancies for public display from commercial employment agencies; [67989]

(2) if he intends to require the Employment Service to charge a fee to commercial employment agencies for advertising job vacancies on their behalf; [67990]

(3) if he will estimate the marginal costs annually to the Employment Service of processing requests from commercial employment agencies for advertising job vacancies. [67991]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service Agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. David Kidney, dated 2 February 1999:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has asked me to reply direct to your questions concerning the relationship that exists between the Employment Service and private employment agencies. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Employment Service.

The Employment Service has an agreement with the Federation of Recruitment and Employment Services (FRES) that Jobcentres will accept individual vacancies for display from employment agencies and businesses, provided they are satisfied that a real vacancy exists. The agreement makes clear that this is at the discretion of the Jobcentre Manager who will take into account the needs of the local labour market and priorities for display space. This agreement was set up to help the Employment Service to fulfil its responsibility to unemployed jobseekers to provide the most opportunities possible for them to find work, and has been instrumental in helping unemployed people into jobs. However, the Employment Service will not handle generic vacancies from employment agencies that seek simply to build up a list of potential jobseekers for the future.

There are currently no plans for the Employment Service to charge a fee to commercial employment agencies for advertising their vacancies. This is because we view such vacancies as a valuable source of jobs to help unemployed jobseekers improve their prospects of gaining work. We would, therefore, wish to avoid deterring agencies from placing vacancies by charging fees which could in turn deny jobseekers the best possible chance of securing a job.

I am afraid that we do not collect information on the marginal costs of processing requests from commercial employment agencies for advertising job vacancies.

I hope this is helpful in clarifying the position.

CABINET OFFICE

Constituency Visits

Mr. Burns: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will make it his policy to ensure the co-ordination of the advice provided to Ministers in respect of informing hon. Members prior to visits to their constituencies. [68933]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Guidance to Ministers on their responsibilities in relation to informing hon. Members of visits to their constituencies is set out in paragraph 79 of the Ministerial Code.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Badger Culling Scheme

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects to appoint external auditors for the Government's badger culling scheme. [64836]

Mr. Rooker: Following the issue of invitations to tender, an external auditor was selected in November 1998 to carry out, during 1999, a detailed audit of culling

trial field operations. A contract is being finalised. We also intend to appoint an external assessor to evaluate the method of despatch used for badgers.

Animal Slaughter

Angela Smith: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) if he will make a statement regarding *(a)* the slaughter of animals outside slaughterhouses without pre-stunning and *(b)* the operation of EC Directive 93/119; [68621]

(2) if he will review UK legislation in relation to the implementation of Directive 93/119 regarding the slaughter of animals. [68622]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 1 February 1999]:* EU Directive 93/119/EC on the protection of animals at the time of slaughter or killing requires that animals must be stunned before slaughter, but permits Member States not to apply that rule when animals are killed without stunning for reasons of religion. The United Kingdom has provided such an exception, and the Government fully respect the right of Jews and Muslims to carry out religious slaughter in accordance with their religious beliefs.

The European Commission is of the view that Directive 93/119 requires religious slaughter to take place only in a slaughterhouse. The Government wish to bring our national implementing regulations into line with this view, and on 7 December 1998 circulated proposals to change the Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995 to require religious slaughter to be carried out only in licensed red meat slaughterhouses or licensed or officially regulated poultry slaughterhouses. We are considering the results of that consultation and of meetings with organisations representing the Jewish and Muslim communities.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received regarding the increased distance meat animals travel to slaughter as a result of the closure of smaller abattoirs. [68126]

Mr. Morley: This Department receives many letters covering a range of animal welfare issues. Some of our correspondents have, amongst other things, expressed their concern that abattoir closures may affect the distance animals travel to slaughter.

Departmental Legislation

Mr. Maude: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what additional legislation, not currently before Parliament, was assumed in the production of his Department's spending allocation for 1999–2000 to 2001–02 in the Comprehensive Spending Review. [68416]

Mr. Morley: There is a long-standing convention that legislative proposals for each year are not announced before the Queen's Speech at the start of the relevant session.

Farm Produce Markets

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what plans he has to provide funding for the establishment of regional farm produce markets; [68069]

(2) what representations he has received on the establishment of a regional farm produce market for the North West; [68070]

(3) if he will list the regional farm produce markets in the United Kingdom. [68071]

Mr. Rooker: *[holding answer 28 January 1999]:* The Ministry does not keep lists of farmers' markets held in the UK and has not received representations on the establishment of a regional farm produce market for the North West. I have no plans to fund the establishment of farmers markets but am keen to encourage them. The Ministry will be holding a seminar in March to promote the concept of farmers' markets.

Genetically Modified Crops

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the risks genetically modified animal feeds pose to humans. [68774]

Mr. Rooker: The Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes rigorously assesses all genetically modified feed material from the point of view of the impact that such feed may have on human health.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list his Department's responsibilities and policies in relation to genetically modified crops and the departments with which he liaises on this issue; and where the lead departmental responsibility rests for each issue. [67663]

Mr. Rooker: My Department's policy is that public health and environmental safety are the fundamental priorities on genetically modified (GM) crops. We believe that the UK agriculture industry should not be denied access to the benefits of GM technology, but that all justified concerns about it must be addressed.

MAFF shares responsibility with the Department of Health for the safety of GM foods. It also shares responsibility with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (who take the lead) on the approval of the release of GM crops into the environment. MAFF takes the lead in a number of areas relevant to GM crops; the agricultural implications of the introduction of GM crops into UK agriculture; plant breeders rights and National Listing and seed certification for all varieties of the main agricultural and vegetable species; and the approval of pesticides, including those to be used on GM herbicide tolerant crops, and GM micro-organisms to be used for plant protection purposes.

Government policy on biotechnology, including GM crops, is co-ordinated by the Ministerial Group on Biotechnology, which is chaired by the Minister for the Cabinet Office, as announced by the Prime Minister on 21 October 1998, *Official Report,* column *1134.* In addition, officials across Government are in regular contact on biotechnology issues.

Fisheries

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his answer of 19 January 1999,

Official Report, column *454*, on fisheries, if he will list those EU countries with which he has discussed the decentralisation of fisheries control to zonal committees within member states; which states indicated their support in principle; and if he will make a statement. [68149]

Mr. Morley: I have not yet discussed with other Member States the ideas of the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations and the Scottish Fishermen's Federation concerning zonal committees. However, the NFFO and SFF have themselves been discussing their ideas with their counterparts in other Member States and I shall be interested to see the outcome of these contacts.

Departmental Papers (Access for Visually Impaired)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has for departmental *(a)* White and *(b)* Green Papers to be made available on floppy disk format in a form which facilitates access for the visually impaired. [67836]

Mr. Morley: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, on 27 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *296*. I confirm that future White and Green Papers issued by MAFF will be made available on standard floppy disk in a suitable form, on request.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 3 February 1999

NORTHERN IRELAND

Departmental Papers (Access for Visually Impaired)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans she has for departmental *(a)* White and *(b)* Green Papers to be made available on floppy disk format in a form which facilitates access for the visually impaired. [67849]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office on 27 January 1999, *Official Report,* column 296.

Pigs

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will publish a table in the *Official Report* to show for each month in 1998 the *(a)* profit and *(b)* loss in respect of (i) each weaner pig produced and (ii) each finished bacon pig from the Government Agricultural College Pig Unit or as much of such information as is readily available. [67779]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Government College Pig Unit operates a birth to bacon system and the financial records are accurate only for finished bacon pigs. Financial records are not maintained for weaner pig production.

Monthly figures are very variable in a 100-sow unit because numbers sold in a month can vary markedly and meal deliveries can also distort the picture.

Quarterly figures give a clearer picture and are provided for gross margin/bacon pig and net margin/bacon pig.

Table to show profit/loss per bacon pig—1998

£

Quarter	*Gross margin[1]/pig*	*Profit/loss/pig*
January-March 1998	8.57	–8.43
April-June 1998	16.34	–0.66
July-September 1998	–11.96	–28.96
October-December 1998	–13.19	–30.19

[1] Gross margin is net output less variable costs e.g. feed, vet bill, replacement costs.

Assumed fixed costs of £17 per pig are used to calculate profit/loss per pig. This is typical of pig units. Fixed costs for the college herd are difficult to isolate from teaching costs. Fixed costs include labour, buildings, water, electricity etc.

For 1998 overall, the College Pig Unit recorded a gross margin of -£1.01 and a loss of £18.01 per pig.

Health Technology Assessment

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list the research and development by *(a)* her Department and *(b)* the NHS, indicating separately that on health technology assessment each year since 1992. [68209]

Mr. McFall: The research expenditure of the Department of Health and Social Services (Northern Ireland) in the period 1992–93 to 1997–98 was as shown in the table. Expenditure on health technology assessment could be identified only at disproportionate cost. In 1996–97, total Health and Personal Social Services expenditure on research was estimated to be approximately £12 million. Totals for other years, and separate identification of expenditure on health technology assessment for 1996–97, cannot be produced except at disproportionate expense.

Research expenditure by Department of Health and Social Services (Northern Ireland)

Year	*£ million*
1992–93	1.62
1993–94	1.83
1994–95	1.50
1995–96	2.25
1996–97	1.30
1997–98	2.10

Departmental Responsibilities

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what responsibilities which her Department had prior to the Comprehensive Spending Review are to be *(a)* discontinued by her Department, *(b)* transferred to another department, *(c)* transferred to an executive agency and *(d)* added to her Department over the period 1998–99 to 2001–02. [68409]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Comprehensive Spending Review did not lead directly to any of the Secretary of State's responsibilities being discontinued, transferred or added over the period 1998–99 to 2001–02. Under devolution, many of the functions currently the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will transfer to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Departmental Legislation

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what additional legislation, not currently before Parliament, was assumed in the production of her Department's spending allocation for 1999–2000 to 2001–02 in the Comprehensive Spending Review. [68425]

Mr. Paul Murphy: There is a long-standing convention that legislative proposals for each year are not announced before the Queen's Speech at the start of the relevant Session.

Criminal Records Office Forms

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what are the rules governing the use of the CRO form by the RUC; what protection exists for

vulnerable witnesses against its misuse; and how many CRO forms were completed by how many individuals in the last year for which figures are available. [67435]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 2 February 1999]:* The RUC use a number of different forms associated with the Criminal Records Office (CRO). Unfortunately it is not clear to which of these my hon. Friend refers and it is not therefore possible to answer his question. If he would care to write giving further details I will ensure he receives a full response, a copy of which will be placed in the library.

WALES

Class Sizes

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what was the percentage of *(a)* five-year-olds, *(b)* six-year-olds and *(c)* seven-year-olds educated in class sizes of 30 or less (i) currently and (ii) in May 1997. [68612]

Mr. Hain: The January 1998 annual Schools' Census showed the following percentages of pupils in Wales were being educated in classes of 30 or less.

Year	*Usual age of pupils*	*Percentage*
Reception	5	74.3
Year 1	6	66.4
Year 2	7	62.5
Other key stage 1 classes of mixed year groups	—	74.9

Comparable information is not available for earlier years.

At January 1998, there were 30,734 pupils in key stage 1 classes of over 30 pupils. On the basis of grant approvals for local authorities to employ additional teachers from September 1998, it is estimated that 23,525 fewer pupils are being educated in classes of this size than would have been the case without grant. The 1999 Schools' Census will give the actual position.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will estimate *(a)* how many schools in Wales have requested additional funding in order to reduce infant class sizes to under 30 pupils in the last 12 months and *(b)* the number of such requests that were successful. [68730]

Mr. Hain: Local education authorities bid for 413 schools to receive funding for infant class size reduction in 1998–99. Bids for 302 schools were successful. LEAs have bid for 570 schools to receive Infant Class Size Reduction Grant in 1999–2000. Bids are currently being assessed and LEAs will be advised of the successful schools in March.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Education Action Zones

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many education action zones have been set up in Wales. [68611]

Mr. Hain: None.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to introduce education action zones in Wales. [68610]

Mr. Hain: We have made it clear that any decision on the introduction of Education Action Zones in Wales will be taken only after full and extensive consultation.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

North Wales Child Abuse Inquiry

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he expects the report of the North Wales Child Abuse Inquiry to be published. [68841]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will arrange for publication of the Tribunal's report when it has been completed: this is not yet the case.

Local Government Expenditure

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on local government revenue spending and grant support in 1999–2000. [69460]

Mr. Michael: I met the Welsh Local Government Association on 15 December and Welsh police authorities on 4 January to discuss the proposed settlement that I announced in December. I have given very careful consideration to their comments on it and to the many comments that I have received from hon. Members and others.

I have decided that, net of specific grants, total standard spending (TSS) for 1999–2000 will be £2,986.6 million and net aggregate external finance will be £2,570.2 million. These final figures represent increases on 1998–99 of 5.1 per cent. and 4.8 per cent. respectively.

Both figures are £0.2 million higher than the provisional amounts I announced on 9 December, because of a small increase in funding to match grants for education, support and training. The extra amount within net TSS for education is also increased, to £70.2 million.

In response to concerns expressed to me during the consultation period, I have decided to alter the formula for calculating the capital charges element of standard spending assessments (SSAs). The effect of the change is to increase SSAs for police authorities by £1.8 million. Details of final SSAs for councils and police authorities are shown in the table.

It also takes account of other minor changes between provisional and final SSAs caused by data changes.

The House will have the opportunity to debate my decisions when it considers the Local Government Finance Report (Wales) 1999–2000 on 11 February.

The breakdown of net TSS is:

	£ million
SSAs for county and county borough councils	2,804.7
SSAs for police authorities	180.1
Payments to bodies specified under section 76 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988	1.8
Total standard spending net of specific grants	2,986.6

Net aggregate external finance for 1999–2000 will consist of revenue support grant (RSG) of £1,892.0 million, council tax reduction scheme grant (damping grant) of £22.2 million and redistributed non-domestic rates of £656.0 million.

The details of the council tax damping scheme remain as I announced in December. The total amount of damping grant and the damping grant entitlement for each council have changed because of changes between provisional and final SSAs. The entitlement for each council is shown in the table at the end of the answer.

The settlement represents a significant real-terms increase for local government, and delivers the Government's priorities for education, social services and other key local services. Within the increase in net TSS, there is £70.2 million extra for education which will cover the cost of the review body's recent recommendations on teachers' pay.

I am not announcing capping criteria in advance for 1999–2000. I expect councils and police authorities to budget prudently. Capping powers remain available to me if any authority makes an excessive increase in its council tax.

Finally, the arrangements for council tax benefit subsidy limitation remain as set out in my answer of 14 December 1995, *Official Report*, column *390*. Guideline figures

"are consistent with an average increase of 7.2 per cent. in council tax which, in broad terms, equates to a budget increase of 5.9 per cent. over this year for each council, subject to allowing each council to spend the increase in its SSA in full;

on council tax above the guideline figure, subsidy would be withdrawn at the rate of 50 per cent."

The guideline figure for each council is shown in the table.

£ million

Council/police authority	SSA for 1999–2000	Entitlement to damping grant [1]	Guideline figure [2]
Isle of Anglesey	68.0	—	70.2
Gwynedd	118.9	—	126.8
Conwy	104.9	—	104.9
Denbighshire	91.6	—	97.1
Flintshire	135.0	—	140.7
Wrexham	112.6	—	118.4
Powys	131.2	—	134.1
Ceredigion	70.3	0.1	75.8
Pembrokeshire	114.6	—	116.9
Carmarthenshire	169.0	—	177.9
Swansea	214.3	0.2	226.7
Neath Port Talbot	133.6	3.1	148.4
Bridgend	123.5	0.0	131.0
The Vale of Glamorgan	110.0	—	112.0
Rhondda, Cynon, Taff	230.3	9.1	254.0
Merthyr Tydfil	59.0	3.8	67.1
Caerphilly	164.0	0.1	172.8
Blaenau Gwent	70.3	5.8	79.4
Torfaen	89.9	—	92.1
Monmouthshire	75.4	—	75.4
Newport	130.6	—	134.2
Cardiff	287.8	—	299.0
All county and county borough councils: total	2,804.7	22.2	Not applicable
Dyfed-Powys	25.8	—	—
Gwent	34.8	—	—
North Wales	37.6	—	—
South Wales	81.9	—	—
All police authorities: total	180.1	Not applicable	Not applicable

[1] Damping grant is paid to councils only

[2] Guideline figures have been set for councils only for 1999–2000. The National Assembly will be able to extend the arrangements for council tax benefit subsidy limitation to police authorities for 2000–01.

In future this will be the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Social Exclusion Unit

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement about the operation of the Social Exclusion Unit in Wales. [69036]

Mr. Hain: The remit of the Social Exclusion Unit covers England only. However, its members and officials from the Welsh Office keep in regular contact to ensure that best practice and good ideas are shared. From time to time, the Unit also draws on expertise from Wales or visits projects in the Principality.

I am a member of the Ministerial Network which guides the work of the Unit. This ensures that Wales has a voice at an early stage in the development of policy with an impact beyond England and that Welsh experience and innovations can be considered as part of the wider process of policy formulation.

The Secretary of State has ensured that policies to combat social exclusion are given renewed priority in the Welsh Office and in future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

North West Wales NHS Trust

Mrs. Betty Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many of *(a)* the applicants and *(b)* those interviewed for the Chairmanship of the North West Wales NHS Trust were (i) male and (ii) female. [69034]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Eight people applied for the Chair of the North West Wales NHS Trust, all male. Three were shortlisted and interviewed for the Chair appointment.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Health Authority Funding

Mrs. Betty Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much was distributed to each health authority and NHS trust in Wales in each of the last three years. [69035]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The Department provided funding to health authorities to purchase health care as set out in the following table. NHS trusts receive most of their funding from their local health authority with additional amounts from other health bodies under contracts to provide health care. A table showing the total income of NHS trusts is also provided.

£ million

Health authorities	*1995–96*[1]
Clwyd	269.954
Dyfed	240.122
Gwent	292.284
Gwynedd	167.592
Mid Glamorgan	374.718
Powys	92.384
South Glamorgan	305.089
West Glamorgan	246.401

£ million

Health authorities	*1996–97*[2]	*1997–98*
Bro Taf	547.699	552.929
Dyfed Powys	350.832	362.580
Gwent	380.139	393.071
Morgannwg	375.359	376.415
North Wales	465.655	487.461

[1] District health authority and family health services authority income

[2] On 1 April 1996 the eight DHAs and eight FHSAs merged to form five health authorities

£ million

NHS trust	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*
Bridgend & District NHS Trust	69.062	84.179	89.648
Cardiff Community NHS Trust	58.194	59.998	62.647
Carmarthen & District NHS Trust	40.503	41.688	43.911
Ceredigion & Mid Wales NHS Trust	24.056	25.679	25.961
Clwydian Community Care NHS Trust	65.521	66.532	68.910
Derwen NHS Trust	22.964	24.405	—
East Glamorgan NHS Trust	50.903	51.516	53.416
Glan Clwyd NHS Trust	62.492	68.483	70.027
Glan Hafren NHS Trust	95.989	73.612	74.022
Glan y Mor NHS Trust	—	73.612	74.022
Gwent Community NHS Trust	60.289	61.103	62.080
Gwynedd Community NHS Trust	50.116	52.768	53.908
Gwynedd Hospitals NHS Trust	61.204	65.455	66.420
Llandough Hospital NHS Trust	59.690	64.400	66.940
Llanelli Dinefwr NHS Trust	31.774	33.515	33.985
Mid Glamorgan Ambulance NHS Trust	8.627	9.307	9.974
Morriston Hospital NHS Trust	73.724	77.993	85.089
Nevill Hall NHS Trust	43.435	46.735	47.988
North Glamorgan NHS Trust	—	61.703	62.802
North Wales Ambulance NHS Trust	13.028	13.787	14.207
Pembrokeshire NHS Trust	43.154	44.853	—
Pembrokeshire/Derwen NHS Trust	—	—	69.073
Powys Healthcare NHS Trust	43.248	44.920	44.544
Rhondda Healthcare NHS Trust	31.910	32.839	34.954
South East Wales Ambulance NHS Trust	18.140	18.374	18.941
Swansea NHS Trust	59.342	63.946	68.507
University Dental Hospital NHS Trust	8.492	8.984	9.184
University Hospital of Wales NHS Trust	166.848	187.587	189.136
Velindre Hospital NHS Trust	13.826	17.310	18.536
West Wales Ambulance NHS Trust	10.989	12.308	12.880
Wrexham Maelor NHS Trust	57.714	61.091	63.815

Note:

A dash denotes that the trust was not operational in the year.

Source:

Audited annual accounts of health authorities, family health services authorities and NHS trusts 1995–96 to 1997–98

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Electronic Warfare

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 25 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *75*, on electronic warfare, if he will take lead responsibility for electronic warfare attacks on *(a)* the banking system, *(b)* utilities, *(c)* telecommunications, *(d)* air traffic control, *(e)* areas currently the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence and *(f)* areas currently within the responsibility of the Cabinet Office. [68312]

Mr. Straw: Following my answer on 25 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *79*, there is to be no change of responsibilities between Departments. I believe that it is better to build upon the relationships and responsibilities that Departments already have with the relevant parts of the private sector. I see no good reason to change this.

My taking the lead responsibility within Government for the measures proposed serves to put onto a more formal footing the liaison over the security arrangements necessary to protect our vital national assets.

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 25 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *75*, on electronic warfare, if his answer was the statement referred to by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Warley (Mr. Spellar), on 4 November 1998, *Official Report*, column 992. [68347]

Mr. Straw: Yes.

Police Recruitment

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the total number of *(a)* initial inquiries, *(b)* applications and *(c)* successful applications, for new police force recruitment, in each police force, in each of the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [68950]

Mr. Boateng: Information is not held centrally on the number of initial recruitment inquiries made to police forces. Information on the number of applications and the number of new recruits to police forces is shown in the tables.

Applications made to police forces in England and Wales

Forces	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*
Avon and Somerset	2,186.00	—	621.00
Bedfordshire	427.00	21.00	284.00
Cambridgeshire	416.00	1,099.00	473.00
Cheshire	1,339.00	829.00	829.00
City of London	780.00	446.00	638.00
Cleveland	291.00	1,393.00	—
Cumbria	354.00	1,053.00	389.00
Derbyshire	1,384.00	807.00	612.00
Devon and Cornwall	1,596.00	1,064.00	1,000.00
Dorset	279.00	377.00	665.00
Durham	1,149.00	1,343.00	848.00
Dyfed-Powys	405.00	573.00	861.00
Essex	1,756.00	1,241.00	304.00
Gloucestershire	405.00	322.00	1,013.00
Greater Manchester	3,049.00	2,366.00	2,614.00
Gwent	1,081.00	932.00	308.00
Hampshire	2,431.00	1,797.00	929.00
Hertfordshire	836.00	659.00	314.00
Humberside	315.00	194.00	219.00
Kent	984.00	1,016.00	261.00
Lancashire	1,254.00	1,765.00	1,307.00
Leicestershire	1,636.00	962.00	711.00
Lincolnshire	379.00	1,236.00	1,077.00
Merseyside	0.00	41.00	3,064.00
Metropolitan Police	10,556.00	3,941.00	4,633.00
Norfolk	398.00	603.00	408.00
Northamptonshire	469.00	469.00	432.00
Northumbria	1,706.00	1,486.00	2,044.00
North Wales	489.00	316.00	638.00
North Yorkshire	360.00	434.00	607.00
Nottinghamshire	1,166.00	927.00	867.00
South Wales	3,669.00	2,208.00	1,654.00
South Yorkshire	982.00	1,180.00	786.00
Staffordshire	530.00	620.00	1,260.00
Suffolk	1,067.00	1,576.00	834.00
Surrey	581.00	543.00	731.00
Sussex	1,791.00	442.00	2,108.00
Thames Valley	837.00	1,556.00	1,889.00
Warwickshire	0.00	201.00	695.00
West Mercia	—	600.00	867.00
West Midlands	3,111.00	2,212.00	3,272.00
West Yorkshire	1,465.00	1,660.00	975.00
Wiltshire	—	264.00	293.00
England and Wales Total	53,909.00	42,774.00	44.334.00

New recruits to police forces in England and Wales

Forces	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*
Avon and Somerset	120.00	141.00	105.00
Bedfordshire	66.00	12.00	46.00
Cambridgeshire	45.00	96.00	58.00
Cheshire	115.00	103.00	87.00
City of London	49.00	42.00	29.00
Cleveland	25.00	80.00	56.00
Cumbria	0.00	74.00	46.00
Derbyshire	52.00	77.00	61.00
Devon and Cornwall	120.00	94.00	172.00
Dorset	18.00	60.00	75.00
Durham	80.00	106.00	105.00
Dyfed-Powys	36.00	45.00	33.00
Essex	92.00	185.00	108.00
Gloucestershire	28.00	60.00	27.00
Greater Manchester	290.00	345.00	436.00
Gwent	81.00	68.00	31.00
Hampshire	194.00	235.00	182.00
Hertfordshire	76.00	126.00	63.00
Humberside	98.00	72.00	70.00
Kent	128.00	268.00	118.00
Lancashire	121.00	182.00	111.00
Leicestershire	173.00	135.00	115.00

New recruits to police forces in England and Wales

Forces	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*
Lincolnshire	19.00	109.00	36.00
Merseyside	30.00	57.00	160.00
Metropolitan Police	1,212.00	670.00	1,164.00
Norfolk	77.00	95.00	55.00
Northamptonshire	41.00	65.00	52.00
Northumbria	258.00	177.00	227.00
North Wales	0.00	0.00	63.00
North Yorkshire	67.00	63.00	65.00
Nottinghamshire	91.00	89.00	0.00
South Wales	246.00	152.00	170.00
South Yorkshire	166.00	200.00	135.00
Staffordshire	65.00	99.00	220.00
Suffolk	7.00	100.00	69.00
Surrey	47.00	55.00	112.00
Sussex	318.00	158.00	136.00
Thames Valley	26.00	183.00	258.00
Warwickshire	0.00	0.00	54.00
West Mercia	50.00	110.00	62.00
West Midlands	507.00	388.00	445.00
West Yorkshire	283.00	267.00	182.00
Wiltshire	68.00	20.00	60.00
England and Wales Total	5,585.00	5,663.00	5,859.00

Prisons Inspectorate (Reports)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the dates his Department received each report from Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons and the date each report was published since May 1997; how many reports are currently being considered by his Department prior to publication; and when they were received by his Department. [68955]

Mr. George Howarth: Since 1 May 1997, 71 reports have been received from Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons. To date, 60 reports have been published. The remaining 11 reports will be published in due course, in line with the agreed protocol. The detailed information is set out in the table.

Publication of reports by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons

Establishment	*Date inspection report received by the Secretary of State*	*Date report published*
Buckley Hall	6 May 1997	3 October 1997
Littlehey	6 May 1997	30 October 1997
Blantyre House	2 June 1997	14 October 1997
Feltham	2 June 1997	23 September 1997
Full Sutton	2 June 1997	22 August 1997
Swaleside	2 June 1997	21 August 1997
Lincoln	23 June 1997	16 October 1997
Exeter	21 July 1997	23 October 1997
Cardiff	29 July 1997	23 October 1997
Dorchester	29 July 1997	23 October 1997
Aldington	29 July 1997	6 November 1997
Northallerton	11 August 1997	30 October 1997
Castington	11 August 1997	6 November 1997
Bullwood Hall	11 August 1997	11 December 1997
Morton Hall	13 August 1997	16 October 1997
Pentonville	14 August 1997	4 December 1997
Hewell Grange	27 August 1997	6 November 1997
Brockhill	27 August 1997	18 February 1998
Haverigg	28 August 1997	13 November 1997
Garth	15 September 1997	11 December 1997
Acklington	16 October 1997	11 December 1997
Kingston	24 October 1997	3 March 1998
Wealstun	28 October 1997	2 December 1997
Grendon/Spring Hill	24 November 1997	12 February 1998
Erlestoke	3 December 1997	4 March 1998

Publication of reports by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons

Establishment	*Date inspection report received by the Secretary of State*	*Date report published*
Swinfen Hall	3 December 1997	11 March 1998
Canterbury	5 December 1997	13 February 1998
Lewes	9 December 1997	1 April 1998
Stoke Heath	9 December 1997	25 February 1998
Cookham Wood	7 January 1998	19 March 1998
Dartmoor	12 January 1998	20 March 1998
Wakefield	28 January 1998	30 April 1998
Glen Parva	28 January 1998	11 March 1998
Manchester	5 February 1998	7 April 1998
Frankland	10 February 1998	15 May 1998
Holloway	18 February 1998	3 June 1998
Blundeston	27 February 1998	22 May 1998
Featherstone	24 March 1998	1 May 1998
Shrewsbury	21 April 1998	1 July 1998
Winchester	21 April 1998	24 June 1998
Gloucester	11 May 1998	17 June 1998
Wellingborough	11 May 1998	18 June 1998
The Mount	11 May 1998	18 June 1998
The Verne	2 June 1998	8 July 1998
Long Lartin	5 June 1998	17 August 1998
Werrington	7 July 1998	23 September 1998
Bedford	8 July 1998	9 September 1998
Everthorpe	3 August 1998	13 October 1998
Belmarsh	5 August 1998	8 October 1998
Aylesbury	13 August 1998	28 October 1998
Eastwood Park	14 August 1998	29 September 1998
Highpoint	14 August 1998	29 September 1998
Sudbury	19 August 1998	16 October 1998
Nottingham	20 August 1998	2 December 1998
Woodhill	1 September 1998	2 October 1998
Haslar	14 September 1998	11 December 1998
North Sea Camp	30 September 1998	8 January 1999
Norwich	1 October 1998	16 December 1998
Thorn Cross	19 October 1998	12 January 1999
Birmingham	19 October 1998	13 January 1999
Leicester	2 December 1998	—
Kirkham	8 December 1998	—
The Wolds	11 December 1998	—
Blakenhurst	14 December 1998	—
Albany	17 December 1998	—
Askham Grange	17 December 1998	—
Feltham	18 December 1998	—
Chelmsford	21 December 1998	—
Doncaster	4 January 1999	—
Elmley	15 January 1999	—
Weare	26 January 1999	—

Premier Prison, Doncaster

Mrs. Mahon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will investigate the procedures used at Doncaster Coroner's Court in relation to the completed inquests into the suicides of prisoners held in the Premier Prison in Doncaster in 1997. [68580]

Mr. George Howarth: We have no plans to do so. Any dissatisfaction with the exercise of the coroner's discretion is a matter for the courts. Complaints about the conduct of the coroner or the administration of the court may be referred to the Home Office.

Town Centres (Safety)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to bring forward proposals on safety in town centres. [68783]

Mr. Boateng: Our proposals on community safety in towns and elsewhere are contained in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, which lays a duty on the local authority and police in every area, in partnership with a wide range of other bodies, to carry out a full audit of the levels and patterns of crime and disorder in that area. Based upon the findings of the audit and after consultation with the community about them, police and council must then formulate and implement a strategy for the reduction of crime and disorder. Where the audit identifies crime or disorder problems in town centres as a major concern, we would expect the strategy to address them.

Immigration Offences

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidelines he has issued on access of persons detained at police stations for immigration offences to hon. Members. [68797]

Mr. Boateng: The Home Office has not issued guidelines on access to Members of Parliament by persons detained under Immigration Act powers and held at police stations. Such detainees may be allowed to contact a Member of Parliament, or anyone else and to receive a visit from a Member of Parliament, or anyone else, at the discretion of the police custody officer.

Home Office booklets have been issued providing "Information for Members of Parliament about immigration and nationality enquiries" and "Guidelines on the handling of representations by Members of Parliament in immigration cases". These booklets seek to help Members of Parliament decide whether or not to make representations in immigration cases and to decide whether those representations should be directed to Home Office Ministers or direct to the Immigration and Nationality Department.

Police Authority Funding

Mr. Salter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the final funding allocations for police authorities in England and Wales will be in 1999–2000. [69600]

Mr. Straw: Allocations for each police authority are set out in the table. The table also shows allocations approved by Parliament for 1998–99.

£ million

Police authority	*1998–1999 allocation* [1]	*1999–2000 allocation* [1]
English Shire forces		
Avon & Somerset	164.3	168.4
Bedfordshire	60.9	61.4
Cambridgeshire	71.9	74.8
Cheshire	104.7	109.0
Cleveland	80.4	81.7
Cumbria	59.0	60.1
Derbyshire	97.7	102.1
Devon & Cornwall	167.4	174.3
Dorset	67.8	70.1
Durham	78.1	81.3
Essex	158.4	163.0
Gloucestershire	61.5	62.4
Hampshire	189.1	194.5
Hertfordshire	94.1	100.0
Humberside	110.6	113.0
Kent	178.9	183.1
Lancashire	174.9	178.2
Leicestershire	99.1	102.3
Lincolnshire	60.7	63.4

£ million

Police authority	1998–1999 allocation [1]	1999–2000 allocation [1]
Norfolk	80.9	83.4
North Yorkshire	75.6	77.6
Northamptonshire	62.8	65.3
Nottinghamshire	123.0	126.3
Staffordshire	111.1	113.0
Suffolk	66.0	68.6
Surrey	84.2	91.9
Sussex	162.6	166.4
Thames Valley	219.3	224.6
Warwickshire	51.1	52.2
West Mercia	110.0	113.0
Wiltshire	63.4	64.9
English Metropolitan forces		
Greater Manchester	364.8	375.7
Merseyside	233.3	236.3
Northumbria	205.4	213.0
South Yorkshire	165.4	171.3
West Midlands	371.9	380.6
West Yorkshire	279.5	286.3
London forces		
Metropolitan Police[2]	1,715.3	1,743.9
City of London[3]	57.1	55.4
English total	6,682.6	6,852.8
Welsh forces		
Dyfed-Powys	51.1	51.7
Gwent	67.3	69.7
North Wales	73.2	75.5
South Wales	161.3	163.8
Welsh total	353.0	360.8
Total	7,035.5	7,213.6

[1] Rounded to the nearest £100,000. The Allocation is the sum of: Police Grant, Transitional Grant, Police SSA, Capital Finance SSA, SSA Reduction Grant and Central Support Protection Grant.

[2] Figure for the Metropolitan Police does not include funding allocated to the Receiver under the Environmental, Protective and Cultural Services SSA for school crossing patrols, Magistrates' Courts and the Probation Service. It does include its Special Payment.

[3] Figure for the City includes Police SSA, Grant and SSA Reduction Grant, but excludes other SSAs (e.g. Capital Financing) and Central Support Protection Grant. These are allocated to the Common Council of the City of London as a whole in respect of all its functions.

Security Service Files

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he has received the report of the Advisory Council on Public Records on their review of the criteria used by the Security Service in deciding whether to retain files on grounds of historical interest. [69601]

Mr. Straw: On 29 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns *251–54*, I announced to the House that, with the approval of the Lord Chancellor, I had invited the Advisory Council on Public Records to review the criteria which the Security Service employs to select files for permanent preservation on grounds of historical interest. The Chairman of the Council, the Master of the Rolls, accepted the invitation and submitted the Council's report to me on 21 December.

The Council's Report concludes with the following recommendations:

1. The following criteria should be added to those which currently guide the selection of files of historical interest:

   i. Organisations and individuals on which security action was required but which were not of great significance nationally or internationally at the time when the action took place.

   Selection should be carried out to show the geographical, national and social range of individuals and organisations with which the Service had dealings. Full details of this criterion to be developed within the operational selection policy.

   ii. Events with which the Service had an active involvement but which were neither newsworthy at the time nor historically significant if considered in isolation.

   Selection should be carried out in order to reflect both developments in the Service's own activities and policies and the social, economic and political context within which the Service operated. Full details of this criterion to be developed within the operational selection policy.

   iii. A sample taken from all files on individuals on whom, after initial investigation, no security action was taken and from the files on individuals not selected under other criteria.

   At a minimum this should be a sample of one out of 100 of such files. The details of the sampling method should be considered as part of the development of an operational selection policy. The taking of a sample is dependent on the preservation of all means of reference.

   iv. All policy and subject files, other than those of an ephemeral nature.

   v. All registers and other means of reference to policy files and to files on subjects, organisations and individuals.

2. The Security Service should work with the Public Record Office to develop an operational selection policy based on the criteria as amended, for completion in 2000–01.

Having consulted the Director General of the Security Service, I have decided to accept that Council's recommendations in full. Additionally, and in response to an observation elsewhere in the report, officials of the Public Record Office with the necessary security clearance will, in future, be invited to examine files which have been earmarked for destruction following review by the Security Service. This will provide a useful measure of external scrutiny of the selection process.

I am most grateful to the Advisory Council for undertaking this valuable review, and for its helpful and constructive recommendations. I am placing a copy of the Report in the Library.

European Elections

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what educational publicity campaign he plans, at what cost, to inform electors of the proportional voting system to be used to elect United Kingdom members of the European Parliament in June. [69033]

Mr. George Howarth: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for East Carmarthen and Dinefwr (Mr. Williams) on 18 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *327*.

School Crossing Patrols

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many school crossing patrol positions there are in England and Wales; and how many vacancies there are. [68814]

Mr. Boateng: I understand from the Local Government Management Board that in 1996, the most recent year for which a figure is available, there were 18,786 school crossing patrol wardens in England and Wales. Information on the number of vacancies is not collected centrally.

Prisons (Charter Marks)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what are the criteria used in assessments of prisons in England and Wales for the awarding of a Charter Mark; and if he will make a statement. [68952]

Mr. Kilfoyle: I have been asked to reply.

The criteria used in assessment of prisons in England and Wales for the award of a Charter Mark are the same as are used in assessing all other public sector applications. For the 1998 assessment process these criteria were:

1. Performance standards
2. Information and openness
3. Consultation and choice
4. Courtesy and helpfulness
5. Putting things right
6. Value for money
7. User satisfaction
8. Improvements in service quality
9. Planned improvements and innovations.

For all applicants the assessment process includes checking with sponsoring Departments, regulatory bodies, statutory user groups and other relevant bodies to ensure that any shortcomings or service failures are known and taken into account. The particular circumstances, including statutory obligations, of each applicant are also taken into account.

Applicants are required to submit a written application supported with evidence. The written application is assessed independently by two different assessors followed by a visit from one or more assessors who review the service on site, examine any additional evidence and meet a cross-section of users. For a prison, users would include the prisoners themselves, Prison Visitors and relatives of prisoners.

The decision to award a Charter Mark is made by an independent panel of judges.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many times he or his junior Ministers, or predecessors in the post, have paid official visits to *(a)* the Czech Republic, *(b)* Poland, *(c)* Hungary, *(d)* Slovenia, *(e)* Estonia and *(f)* Cyprus since May 1997; and what was the purpose of each visit. [67700]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 27 January 1999]:* Since May 1997 DTI Ministers have made the following visits to Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic.

Ministerial visit	*Purpose of visit*
December 1997	
Hungary	Trade Promotion
Czech Republic	Trade Promotion
Poland	Trade Promotion
January 1998	
Czech Republic	Trade Policy
Hungary	Trade Promotion
September 1998	
Poland	Address a Seminar on Entrepreneurship and meeting with the Polish Minister for the Economy

There have been no visits to Slovenia, Estonia or Cyprus.

BAT Industries and Rothmans International

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement about the regulatory procedures which must now be followed in respect of the proposed merger between BAT Industries and Rothmans International. [67949]

Dr. Howells: It will be necessary to determine whether this proposed merger falls for consideration by the European Commission under the EC Merger Regulation, or by the UK authorities under the Fair Trading Act 1973. If it falls to the EC Merger Regulation it is for the parties to notify the European Commission. The UK plays a formal role in the Commission's assessment process. If it falls to the UK authorities my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry would decide whether or not to refer it to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission in the light of the advice of the Director General of Fair Trading. Each case is considered on its own merits.

Export Licences (Records)

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for how long a British company or agency which has supplied military, security or police equipment which has been exempted from export licence requirements is required to maintain records of such transfers. [68303]

Dr. Howells: Export of controlled military and paramilitary goods is subject to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, made under the provisions of the Import, Export and Customs Powers (Defence) Act 1939. The 1939 Act does not bind the Crown. In addition, a number of international organisations have had immunity from export prohibitions conferred upon them by means of Orders in Council made under the International Organisations (Immunities and Privileges) Act 1968. The Government and those immune international organisations are under no legal obligation to maintain records of their exports.

No other agencies or companies are exempt from the provisions of the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994.

Electro-shock Batons

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) if he will list the companies granted export licences for the export of electro-shock batons to *(a)* Egypt, *(b)* Botswana and *(c)* Saudi Arabia; [68230]

(2) which British company brokered the trans-shipment of electro-shock batons to Saudi Arabia under the trans-shipment licence granted by his Department in 1993. [68194]

Dr. Howells: I refer my hon. Friend to the letter to her, dated 16 July 1998, from my noble Friend Lord Clinton-Davis. A copy of this letter was placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many visits his officials have made to British Aerospace to check that electro-shock batons were not transferred to Saudi Arabia as part of the Al Yamamah deal. [68331]

Mr. George Robertson: I have been asked to reply.

Officials from both the Department of Trade and Industry and the Ministry of Defence contacted BAe Royal Ordnance following allegations made in a Channel 4 "Dispatches" programme, screened on 11 January 1995. The Company has gone on record to deny the allegations made in the programme.

PVC Toys

Mr. Salter: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to implement the recommendations of the European Commission's Scientific Committee on Toxicity, Ecotoxicity and the Environment in respect of the sale of soft PVC toys. [68917]

Dr. Howells: The independent Scientific Committee on Toxicity, Ecotoxicity and the Environment (SCTEE) was asked by the European Commission to provide an opinion on the use of phthalate plasticisers in soft PVC toys, including tethers. The SCTEE made a number of recommendations and observations. These include concerns about the possible use of one phthalate (DEHP) in toys intended to be mouthed by children and a recommendation on a safe migration level for DINP. The SCTEE's assessment of the toxicity of phthalates is consistent with the views of the EU Scientific Committee for Food.

Tests of PVC toys and tethers have been commissioned by DTI, based on the SCTEE's recommendations. These indicate that DEHP is no longer used in PVC toys and to date no toys have been found on the UK market which release DINP in levels above those recommended by the SCTEE. A programme of testing to monitor phthalates release levels is continuing.

Export Licences (Alvis)

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the visits his officials have undertaken to audit open individual export licences held by Alvis since 1988. [68787]

Dr. Howells: Since 1988, ECO Compliance Officers have made 6 routine compliance visits in total to Alvis Logistics Ltd. and Alvis Vehicles Ltd.

Alvis Logistics Ltd. were visited on 24 July 1996; 29 April and 16 December 1997.

Alvis Vehicles Ltd. were visited on 24 July 1996; 29 April and 16 December 1997.

Electronic Equipment

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to encourage recycling of electronic equipment. [68626]

Dr. Howells: Electrical and electronic equipment is one of the sectors targeted in the Government's Producer Responsibility initiative. Through this initiative, the Department of Trade and Industry has encouraged industry-led action to increase re-use and recycling of electrical and electronic equipment. Recently, the Department issued a guide to the re-use of unwanted computer equipment.

The Government are currently developing a new waste strategy, and has made clear that they are committed to achieving substantial increases in recycling. In this context, the Government are currently assessing options for developing the markets for recycled materials and products.

Director General of Research Councils (Hewlett-Packard)

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the arrangements by which the Director General of Research Councils will avoid conflicts of interest while on secondment from Hewlett-Packard. [69352]

Mr. Byers: The DGRC, Dr. John Taylor, will continue to be paid by Hewlett-Packard while on secondment from Hewlett-Packard to the DTI. For the duration of this appointment, the DTI will reimburse Hewlett-Packard at a rate within the relevant Senior Civil Service pay band for his post.

In addition, Dr. Taylor will stand aside from discussions or decisions having any specific effect on Hewlett-Packard for the duration of his appointment. In practice, since the Department is not involved in decisions on individual science projects in accordance with the Haldane principle, and since Research Councils funding goes to universities and scientific institutes rather than firms, no material difficulties are foreseen.

Should, unusually, funding be granted directly from the Research Councils to Hewlett-Packard, I will report this to Parliament and give details of the circumstances.

Vibration White Finger

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many people in the north-west Region are claiming compensation for suffering from vibration white finger. [69172]

Mr. Battle: The total number of Vibration White Finger claims received by IRISC, the Department's claim handlers, from people in the north-west region is 1,247.

Arms Exports

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on his Department's policy on the EU code of conduct on arms exports. [68929]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I have been asked to reply.

We are committed to the implementation of the provisions of the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Line of Route (Summer Opening)

Mrs. Gordon: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), representing the House of Commons Commission, if he will make a statement on opening the Line of Route during the summer adjournment. [69171]

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, if he will make a statement on proposals to open the Palace of Westminster to visitors on Saturdays, Sundays and during periodic adjournments; and what plans there are to charge such visitors. [68598]

Mr. Kirkwood: The Commission has approved in principle the re-opening of the Line of Route during the Summer Recess. The need to comply with EU procedures in letting contracts makes it impossible, however, to achieve the re-opening earlier than the summer of 2000.

On the advice of the Administration Committee, the Finance and Services Committee will look at the viability of a project prepared by a firm of outside consultants on how the Line of Route re-opening is to be managed. It will report its conclusions to the House of Commons Commission.

In respect of the specific matter of charging visitors who wish to use the Line of Route, the Commission has taken the view that this is a matter which the House itself should decide. A motion will be put before the House in due course.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Motor Scooters

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the speed limit that applies to drivers of 49cc motor scooters. [67666]

Ms Glenda Jackson: There is no specific speed limit for 49cc motor scooters, which are classed as motor cycles. The road speed limits, either set nationally or locally by traffic authorities, therefore apply. Motorcycles of under 50cc are not permitted on motorways.

Local Authority Databases

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if a local authority is permitted to merge databases containing personal data which were originally collected for diverse functions, on the grounds that such a merger would improve the economy, efficiency or effectiveness of that authority; and if he will make a statement. [68049]

Mr. Raynsford: In discharging their functions, local authorities must make such arrangements as necessary to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness. Where these arrangements involve the merging of databases containing personal data the Data Protection Act must be complied with. In November 1997 the Audit Commission published a Code of Data Matching Practice for local authorities, and the Data Protection Registrar has indicated that she expects them to comply with the Code's provisions.

Drink Driving

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions in how many cases a driver, found to be over the legal limit for alcohol, has caused the death of another person in each of the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [68308]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The numbers of accidents which involved a driver who was over the legal limit for alcohol and in which one or more people killed were not themselves drivers above the legal limit were: 170 in 1994, 200 in 1995 and 190 in 1996.

These are estimates rounded to the nearest ten and are given for the last three years for which figures are available.

HGVs (Channel Crossings)

Mrs. Gorman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the average daily number of Heavy Goods Vehicles arriving in Kent from *(a)* continental ports and *(b)* the Channel Tunnel. [68304]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The average daily number of powered goods vehicles, i.e. excluding unaccompanied trailers, arriving in Kent is 1,800 from continental ports and 800 through the Channel Tunnel.

Trunk Roads (Herefordshire)

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has held with Herefordshire Council on improvements to trunk roads in Hereford. [68232]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Highways Agency and the Government Office for the West Midlands are discussing with Herefordshire Council measures to ease traffic congestion in Hereford. These measures include both those on the A49 trunk road and those on the local road network being promoted by the local authority through the Hereford package. A meeting was held on 21 December to establish priorities and set a realistic timetable for improvements to the A49 and complementary measures on the local road network.

Belmont Roundabout

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the

Highways Agency will present for public consideration schemes to improve the junction of the A49 and A465 at the Belmont Roundabout. [68233]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Lawrie Haynes, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Lawrie Haynes to Mr. Paul Keetch, dated 3 February 1999:

The Transport Minister, Glenda Jackson has asked me to reply to your recent question about when the Highways Agency will present for public consideration schemes to improve the junction of the A49 and A465 at the Belmont Roundabout.

Representatives of the Agency have already held preliminary discussions with officers of Herefordshire Council about ways to take forward a package of measures to ease traffic congestion on the A49 trunk road in Hereford, and will continue to work with them to identify solutions to complement their local road network.

The Council is bringing forward changes to their traffic management arrangements within Hereford and these will impact on the A49. The Agency will take these into account before bringing forward measures to improve the A49 trunk road through Hereford, including improvements to the A49/A465 junction.

We currently expect to consult all interested parties, including members of the public, early next year. We will improve on this timetable if possible. I will keep you informed of progress.

Public Expenditure Statistical Analysis

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will (i) account for the difference between outturn departmental spending in Table A1 of the Comprehensive Spending Review and outturn departmental spending in Table 1.2 of the 1998–99 Public Expenditure Statistical Analysis for his Department excluding local government and regional policy for *(a)* 1993–94, *(b)* 1994–95, *(c)* 1995–96 and *(d)* 1996–97 and (ii) provide forecast figures for departmental spending for his Department excluding local government and regional policy for (1) 1997–98, (2) 1998–99, (3) 1999–2000, (4) 2000–01 and (5) 2001–02 on a comparable basis to Table 1.2 of the 1998–99 Public Expenditure Statistical Analysis. [68381]

Dr. Reid: Information in the 1998–99 Public Expenditure Statistical Analysis was provided on the basis of the existing financial control framework. The comprehensive spending review introduced new departmental expenditure limits which (i) included elements previously outside the control total and (ii) excluded elements previously within the control total. For this Department the new elements included within its departmental expenditure limit were provision for the Capital Receipts Initiative and bus fuel duty rebate. The elements excluded from this Department's departmental expenditure limit were provision for Housing Revenue Account Subsidy and National Air Traffic Services Ltd.

The Department's detailed spending plans for 1998–99 and, estimated outturn for 1997–98, are published in the Departmental Annual Report 1998 (Cm 3906). The Department's detailed spending plans for 1999–2000, 2000–01 and 2001–02 will be included in the Departmental Annual Report 1999 due to be published in late March.

Departmental Responsibilities

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what responsibilities which his Department had prior to the Comprehensive Spending Review are to be *(a)* discontinued by his Department, *(b)* transferred to another department, *(c)* transferred to an executive agency and *(d)* added to his Department over the period 1998–99 to 2001–02. [68405]

Dr. Reid: The only significant planned changes in the Department's responsibilities are in respect of the Rent Officer Service Agency, to be established in October 1999, and, subject to legislation, the transfer of certain responsibilities for railways to the Strategic Rail Authority.

Departmental Legislation

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what additional legislation, not currently before Parliament, was assumed in the production of his Department's spending allocation for 1999–2000 to 2001–02 in the Comprehensive Spending Review. [68421]

Dr. Reid: There is a long-standing convention that legislative proposals for each year are not announced before the Queen's Speech at the start of the relevant Session.

Houses in Multiple Occupation

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals his Department has to further regulate houses in multiple occupation. [68842]

Mr. Raynsford: We expect to issue a consultation paper on proposals for licensing of houses in multiple occupation in the early part of this year.

Genetically Modified Food

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what plans he has made to ensure that an up-to-date register of all genetically modified food test sites is available to the relevant local authority; [68615]

(2) what plans he has to provide statutory consultee status to local authorities before genetically modified food test sites are authorised; [68616]

(3) what action his Department has taken in response to objections from residents near to genetically modified food test sites; [68617]

(4) if he will introduce measures to give residents within 800 metres of a genetically modified food test site the right to object to authorisation of the site. [68618]

Mr. Meacher: My Department maintains a statutory register of prescribed information concerning applications for consent to release genetically modified organisms. The full register is maintained at the Department's London Office in Victoria Street. Registers are also maintained at Regional Offices of the Environment Agency and the Health and Safety Executive's Office in Edinburgh.

Copies of items on the register are provided by post on request. Information on release sites and their locations is also available on the Department's Internet Website.

All applicants for consent to release genetically modified organisms must place an advertisement giving the prescribed information in a newspaper circulating the area of the proposed release site. Any one, including nearby residents and local authorities, may raise an objection by writing to the Secretary of State. All objections received are considered before a decision is made on whether or not to grant consent; where appropriate, the views of the statutory Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment are sought.

There are no plans to give local authorities or nearby residents statutory consultation status.

Genetically Modified Crops

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will report on his consideration of a moratorium on commercial licences for genetically modified crops. [68619]

Mr. Meacher: A number of organisations have called for a moratorium on the commercial growing of genetically modified crops. There are at present no genetically modified crops which have received all the necessary approvals to be grown commercially in Britain. The announcement I made on 21 October 1998 to the House of Lords Select Committee on the European Communities set out a programme of managed development of herbicide tolerant genetically modified crops with additional safeguards to ensure full protection of the environment. The situation will be kept under review.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 17 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *629*, when he expects the paper on the possible wider implications of genetically modified crops to be made publicly available. [68776]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 2 February 1999]:* I expect this discussion paper which was prepared by the Secretariat to the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE) to be made available via ACRE's page on my Department's website as soon as possible.

Council Tax Benefit

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list those *(a)* local authorities, *(b)* local authority organisations, *(c)* local authority interest groups and *(d)* other organisations which have made representations in support of proposals to limit the payment of council tax benefit subsidy in 1999–2000. [68634]

Ms Armstrong: We have not received any representations supporting our proposals to limit the payment of council tax benefit subsidy in 1999–2000.

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list those *(a)* local authorities, *(b)* local authority associations, *(c)* local authority interest groups and *(d)* other organisations which have made representations (i) opposing and (ii) seeking postponement of proposals to limit the payment of council tax benefit subsidy in 1999–2000. [68633]

Ms Armstrong: I have today placed in the library a list of those *(a)* local authorities, *(b)* local authority organisations, *(c)* local authority interest groups and *(d)* other organisations which have made representations (i) opposing or (ii) seeking postponement of the proposals to limit the payment of council tax benefit subsidy in 1999–2000.

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the aggregate amount of council tax subsidy to be withdrawn from local authorities in each of the years *(a)* 1999–2000, *(b)* 2000–01 and *(c)* 2001–02 as a consequence of the proposal to limit council tax benefit subsidy; and what plans he has to return the withdrawn sums to local authorities in aggregate. [68632]

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the annual amount of council tax benefits subsidy to be withdrawn from local councils in the next financial year. [68733]

Ms Armstrong: Only local authorities exceeding the guideline will have to make a contribution to the costs of council tax benefit. We have not made any estimate of this. It is up to local authorities to decide what council tax to set and they will have to consider the impact of the Council Tax Benefit Subsidy Limitation scheme when making these decisions.

Airports

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) when he intends to publish the White Paper on aviation and airport policy; [68341]

(2) what steps he is taking to ensure that there is sufficient airport capacity to meet forecast air traffic growth in the South East up to and beyond 2015; and if he will make a statement; [68333]

(3) if he plans to publish a White Paper on aviation and airport policy during the current Parliament. [69027]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 1 February 1999]:* In our White Paper "A New Deal for Transport" we set out a number of key policy principles relating to airports. We also announced that we will prepare a new statement of UK airports policy, and a large amount of preparatory work is now under way. We are considering the precise scope and timing of the policy statement, and how to undertake the necessary preparatory work relating to South East England, and will make a further announcement in due course.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the findings of the 1993 Study of Runway Capacity to Serve the South East. [68334]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 1 February 1999]:* The study of Runway Capacity to Serve the South East was prepared at the behest of the previous Government. In preparing a

new UK airports policy statement, we shall wish to take a fresh look at the issue, in the light of the principles we have set out in the "New Deal for Transport" White Paper.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the impact of the timetable for planning for new airport capacity in the South East on the competitiveness of the region. [68335]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 1 February 1999]:* The Government recognise the importance of airport capacity for competitiveness in the South East. The impact of the timetable for planning new airports capacity will therefore be an important factor informing the precise scope and timing of the new UK airports policy statement.

Global Warming

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the effect of global warming on sea levels. [68695]

Mr. Meale: The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, in its 1995 assessment, reported that global mean sea level has risen 10–25cm over the last 100 years, and that it is likely that this rise has been largely due to the concurrent increase in global temperature over the same time period.

The Panel's projections for the future, for a wide range of emission scenarios, are that global mean sea level will rise by 15–95cm by the year 2100. Research funded by my Department at the Hadley Centre suggests that, for a "business as usual scenario", global mean sea level will rise by about 50cm by the year 2100.

Estimates of sea level rise for regions of the UK were prepared for the UK Climate Impacts Programme and published in 1998, for various climate change scenarios which take account of expected land movements. Similar allowances to the changes now estimated have been used since 1989 for the construction or improvement of sea defences.

Eurostar Services

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what information he has received from the Eurostar consortium regarding the viability of direct Eurostar services from West Coast Main Line stations north of Watford to mainland Europe; [68847]

(2) what assessment he has made of the possible use of public subsidy to support direct Eurostar services from the West Coast Main Line to mainland Europe; [68848]

(3) what plans he has to invite other service providers to submit proposals for direct Eurostar services from the West Coast Main Line to mainland Europe. [68849]

Dr. Reid: My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister received a report from Inter-Capital and Regional Rail Ltd. (ICRR), the consortium appointed by London and Continental Railways to manage and operate Eurostar, on 13 November 1998 entitled "Review of Regional Eurostar Services". On 28 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *340*, he announced the commissioning of a thorough and independent review. In addition to consideration of a broad range of key elements, this review will address itself in particular to the study completed by ICRR and to the alternative proposals put forward by the Virgin Group. He has asked for a report to be presented to Government as soon as practicable.

Disabled Parking

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will make it his policy to make it an offence to park in disabled parking boxes without authorisation; [69051]

(2) what recent representations he has received in favour of making unauthorised parking in disabled parking boxes a criminal offence. [69052]

Ms Glenda Jackson: It is already an offence under Section 47 of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 to park a vehicle which is not displaying an Orange Badge in an on-street designated disabled persons' parking bay.

The Orange Badge Scheme does not, however, apply to off-street car parks, whether local authority or privately owned, and enforcement of those disabled persons' parking bays is a matter for the operator concerned. In the case of local authority off-street car parks, their off-street parking place orders normally make it either an offence for someone not displaying a valid Orange Badge to park in a disabled persons' parking bay or make it subject to the payment of an "excess charge". In private car parks, we understand it is possible in law for the owners to agree with the local authority that a parking place order be made in respect of that car park. Conditions of use can then be enforced as if it were a local authority car park, with penalties or excess charges levied on offenders.

Pipework Materials

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what monitoring he is conducting of the Water Industry Specifications Committee's emerging standard for plastic pipes; [68116]

(2) what estimate he has made of the percentage of sewers which are made from thin wall plastics; [68118]

(3) what assessment he has made of the susceptibility of each of the principal sewerage drainage pipe materials to damage by rodents. [68121]

Mr. Meale: The development of Water Industry Specifications, choice of pipework materials, durability and susceptibility to damage is a matter for the water and sewerage undertakers. The Department does not collect information on materials used by the water industry.

Rats

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures he proposes to ensure that rats do not escape into properties from sewers. [68117]

Mr. Meale: Sewerage undertakers have ongoing programmes to control and reduce the number of rats in public sewers. These include baiting, which is usually targeted only in those areas where there is evidence of

rats so as to avoid unnecessary waste of funds. In following up one of the recommendations of the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee Report on Sewage Treatment and Disposal, my officials are initiating discussions between the Local Government Association and Water UK to establish what further action may be needed, who should carry it out and whether local authorities need greater powers. The water industry is also conducting research into the most effective ways of controlling rats in sewers.

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will incorporate a rodent damage test for drainage pipes in the review of Part H of the Building Regulations. [68119]

Mr. Raynsford: In considering whether the advice on preventing rodent damage needs to be strengthened, the review of Part H will consider all relevant issues.

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of recent trends in the level of rat infestations of homes and businesses. [68120]

Mr. Raynsford: The DETR's 1996 English House Condition Survey collected data on the incidence or rodents and the types of treatments that are being used to treat any infestation. Results should be published later this year.

Drinking Water (Contamination)

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what arrangements are in place to monitor the contamination of drinking water supplies by leaking sewers and drains; and what has been the results of such monitoring in each of the last three years. [68122]

Mr. Meale: Water companies are required to notify the Drinking Water Inspectorate of any event or incident which affects or threatens to affect drinking water quality. In 1998, 1997 and 1996 water companies reported 7, 4 and 7 occasions respectively when a leaking sewer threatened drinking water quality and precautionary measures were taken to protect consumers, but on all of these occasions there was no evidence that public health was affected.

Water companies are required to monitor routinely drinking water quality at consumers' taps for faecal coliforms, the main indicator of microbiological contamination. If faecal coliforms are detected water companies take immediate action to protect consumers and rectify the cause. The table shows the results for the last three years for which data is available and includes detections where companies found that the consumers' taps were contaminated.

Year	*Number of samples from consumers taps*	*Number (%) of samples in which faecal coliforms detected*
1995	156,306	111(0.07)
1996	157,342	97(0.06)
1997	157,252	97(0.06)

Air Services (Punctuality)

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to monitor the punctuality of scheduled air services in the same way as rail services are currently monitored. [68533]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Civil Aviation Authority has published monthly and annual punctuality statistics for scheduled and charter passenger services from principal airports since January 1998. Reports are published monthly on the CAA's website (www.caa.co.uk) and a press notice outlining trends in delays is issued quarterly.

Highways Agency Projects

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list Highways Agency projects in 1998, including the 1998 national travel survey, which made use of *(a)* automatic traffic counters, *(b)* roadside interviews, *(c)* manual classified counts and *(d)* additional surveys undertaken outside the normal hours of 7 am to 7 pm on weekdays. [67710]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The following is a table based on the information which is readily available, of the Highways Agency's projects for which surveys were undertaken in 1998. The table uses the types of surveys defined in the question but the headings describing the types of survey have been abbreviated to *(a)* ATCs, *(b)* RSIs and *(c)* MCCs.

There were no additional surveys undertaken in connection with Highways Agency projects outside the normal hours of 7am to 7pm Monday to Friday.

Project	*ATCs*	*RSIs*	*MCCs*
A428 Caxton Common to Hardwick	Yes	Yes	Yes
A14 Route Management Strategy	Yes		
Salisbury Transport Study	Yes	Yes	Yes
A2/A282 Dartford Traffic Surveys	Yes	Yes	Yes
Bristol Severnside Study	Yes		
A596 Wigton Bypass before/after	Yes		Yes
A5 Fazeley before/after	Yes		Yes
A1M Washford-Dishforth	Yes		
M621/M1 Link before/after	Yes		
M65 Blackburn Southern Bypass	Yes		
M1/A1 Link (Lofthouse/Branham) before/after	Yes		
A564 Derby Southern Bypass	Yes		
A1033 Hendon Road Improvement	Yes		Yes
M62 J8 and J8–9 widening	Yes	Yes	Yes
A56 Manchester Sub-Regional Highway Model	Yes	Yes	
A140 Newton Flotman	Yes		Yes
A13 Wennington-Mar Dyke before/after	Yes		
A11 Roudham Heath-Attleborough	Yes		
A12 Hatfield Peveral-Witham Link Road	Yes		

The National Travel Survey is undertaken by DETR and consists of household interviews only. As part of DETR's continuous collection of traffic data, the following surveys were undertaken during 1998:

Continuous automatic traffic counters at 134 sites;

Approximately 6,000 manual classified counts between 7am and 7pm weekdays;

Manual classified counts (16 or 24 hour) at approximately one third of the 523 sites on screen lines and cordons across London; and

Twenty four hour manual classified counts at 50 sites four times per year within London.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Aid (EU)

7. **Mr. David Davis:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the provision of value for money in the EU aid budget. [67509]

15. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the cost-effectiveness of the EU development aid programme. [67521]

Clare Short: We have inherited from the previous administration a commitment that 30 per cent. of my budget is channelled through the EC and a situation where EC aid spending is skewed against the poorest countries and is often of poor quality. In December we published our strategy to improve EC performance.

We are actively seeking support for this strategy in the Commission, the European Parliament and among Member States. I welcome the report of the Development Select Committee supporting the Government's strategy.

Development Education

9. **Helen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she is taking to promote awareness of development issues among young people. [67512]

Mr. Foulkes: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have visited many schools and colleges on each of our visits to towns and cities throughout the UK and found great enthusiasm for development issues. Expanding the coverage of these issues in the school curriculum is our top priority and we are pursuing this with other Departments and agencies in relation to each part of the United Kingdom.

Sudan

10. **Mr. Allan:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what medical aid projects the Government are currently supporting in Sudan. [67515]

11. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will provide pharmaceutical products as aid to Sudan. [67516]

Clare Short: Our humanitarian response to the crisis in Sudan last year, which amounted to £37 million, included an allocation of £5.5 million for health care to the most vulnerable groups. The Government of Sudan, by its own admission, is spending 80 per cent. of the national budget on the civil war. The major priority for improving life for the people of Sudan is an end to the war.

Education (Girls)

12. **Fiona Mactaggart:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development in what ways her Department is supporting the education of girls in poorer countries; and if she will make a statement. [67517]

Clare Short: As we make clear in the Development White Paper, we are strongly committed to the key international targets of Universal Primary Education by 2015 and gender equity in primary and secondary education by 2005. We are working in the international system to try to increase the commitment to meeting this target and prioritising these targets in all our programmes. For example, we have recently committed over £200 million to basic education in a number of countries including Ghana, India, Zambia, Malawi, Kenya, South Africa, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and our largest ever single education commitment of £67 million for Uganda.

We are also working co-operatively with the World Bank, UNICEF, and the Rockefeller Foundation, to develop practical strategies which will encourage the enrolment of girls in school in countries with very low enrolment rates.

Debt Relief

13. **Mr. McAllion:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent discussions she has had with voluntary organisations in relation to the reduction of the debt burden on developing countries. [67518]

Clare Short: In December, I met the directors of the voluntary organisations which comprise the British Overseas Aid Group (BOAG)—ActionAid, Oxfam, the Catholic Fund for Overseas Development (CAFOD), Christian Aid and Save the Children Fund. Also in December, I met BOND—which represents the smaller NGOs. They agreed with the need to develop and strengthen the link between debt relief and poverty reduction and welcomed the fact that we are pressing for this issue to be considered during the forthcoming comprehensive review of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Debt Initiative, and for civil society in developing countries to be involved in the review.

22. **Mr. Pike:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with the new German Government about debt relief and poverty reduction. [67528]

Clare Short: I met the German Development Minister in Bonn in November last year. The discussions covered poverty reduction, debt relief and a number of other development issues. I was pleased to find a new convergence of UK and German views on development policies. In December, officials from my Department and the Treasury followed up in discussions with their German counterparts proposals for taking forward the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (HIPC).

24. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with ministers of the German Government concerning an initiative on debt relief for developing countries at the European Council meeting in Cologne. [67530]

Clare Short: I met the German Development Minister and her officials in Bonn in November last year. The discussions covered poverty reduction, debt relief and a number of other development issues. We shall continue to work closely with the German government during their Presidency of the European Union and of the G8 on their proposals for debt relief, which are similar to those in our own Mauritius Mandate.

25. **Mr. Jim Cunningham:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she is taking to reduce the debts of the poorest countries. [67531]

Clare Short: The Chancellor and I are working to see international agreement to speed up the implementation of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) debt initiative so that all eligible countries will be on track for debt relief by 2000. We are pressing for this and other key issues, including the level of debt relief and the link to poverty reduction, to be examined during the comprehensive review of the HIPC initiative which is to report by July this year. Over the past two years, the Department for International Development (DFID) has cancelled some £30 million of bilateral aid debts and provided some £36 million to help the African Development Bank meet its share of the cost of implementing the HIPC debt initiative. We are also providing around £100 million to help a number of developing countries meet their debt service payments to international financial institutions. In addition, DFID is providing technical assistance in debt management to poor countries and funding research on the key issues of debt sustainability and internal debt. In the run-up to the Cologne Summit, we are working closely with the German government, whose proposals for debt relief are similar to those in our own Mauritius Mandate.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to support the recent initiative of the German Chancellor on debt relief for developing nations. [68098]

Clare Short: We welcome the recent German proposals for debt relief. In many of their elements, they reinforce the Mauritius Mandate, launched by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in September 1997. It is encouraging to see that the German proposals call for the cancellation of aid loans to Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) but we should like to see them extending aid debt relief to more countries.

My greatest concern remains that debt relief should be linked to poverty reduction. This aspiration was contained in Chancellor Schroeder's proposals. We have pressed that the IMF/World Bank review of HIPC should give more emphasis to the link between debt relief and poverty reduction.

Kosovo and Montenegro

14. **Mr. Coaker:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what progress is being made to support the continuing humanitarian relief effort in *(a)* Kosovo and *(b)* Montenegro. [67519]

Clare Short: The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that there were 200,000 persons displaced within Kosovo as at 22 January.

We are working closely with international organisations, led by UNHCR, to ensure that the humanitarian needs of those affected by the conflict in Kosovo are met. During 1999, UNHCR-led convoys have provided food and other items to more than 40,000 people throughout Kosovo. These supplies were provided through UNHCR, World Food Programme, Mercy Corps International, Catholic Relief Services, Children's Aid Direct, Doctors of the World, World Vision and Oxfam.

It has been reported that refugees have begun entering Montenegro once more in the light of deteriorating security in Kosovo. UNHCR are financing an operation to register refugees from Kosovo who will be provided with an identity card to confirm that they are entitled to assistance.

The World Health Organisation is co-ordinating regular visits by medical teams, which are currently providing mental outreach services and organising education and hygiene programmes for those living in collective centres.

Intermediate Technology

16. **Mr. Baldry:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what initiatives her Department is taking to support intermediate technology. [67522]

Clare Short: We believe the poor need access to technology appropriate for the development of sustainable livelihoods. As part of our effort we are funding a three-year programme with the Intermediate Technology Development Group to develop policy and technologies within eight key engineering sectors which span domestic and small-scale industrial applications.

Medical Services (Children)

17. **Mr. Lock:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on her Department's support for medical services for children in *(a)* countries suffering emergencies from natural causes and *(b)* war zones. [67523]

Clare Short: The provision of medical assistance for children caught up in emergencies is considered alongside other needs as an integral part of our humanitarian assistance provided in response to crises caused by conflicts and natural disasters. We channel support through United Nations agencies, the Red Cross and non-governmental organisations; looking first to agencies that are well established in the country and have the local knowledge and expertise to deliver assistance most effectively. Children affected by armed conflict have special needs for protection, and we strongly support the efforts of the Special representative of the United Nations Secretary-General on children in armed conflict, and UNICEF, to promote the safety and welfare of children in war zones.

Commonwealth Development Corporation

18. **Mr. Stunell:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer concerning the future tax position of the Commonwealth Development Corporation. [67524]

Clare Short: We are working with HM Treasury and the Inland Revenue to produce a tax solution that will encourage investment in the poorest countries through the CDC public–private partnership. Parliament will have the opportunity to scrutinise our proposals.

The Commonwealth Development Corporation needs to be tax efficient if it is to be able to achieve its goal of investing in developing countries using private capital raised within the context of a competitive private investment market dominated by offshore funds. In order to compete directly with offshore funds for private capital for investment in its area, CDC would need to provide a similar financial return. A material UK tax charge within CDC would make this less achievable.

Zimbabwe

19. **Mr. Evans:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent representations she has received on aid to Zimbabwe. [67525]

Clare Short: Since 1 December, I have answered 10 Parliamentary Questions and replied to letters from hon. Members on both sides of the House. We have also been engaging in a consultation process within Zimbabwe on our country strategy.

Great Lakes Region

20. **Ms Oona King:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the crisis in the great lakes region of Africa. [67526]

Clare Short: We are deeply disturbed about the impact of the ongoing conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the consequences for the people throughout the Great Lakes region. The involvement of so many other countries in the continuing conflict in the DRC and the risks of escalation are very serious. We are ready to provide humanitarian assistance where this is possible. But a ceasefire is needed urgently. Britain is supporting efforts by President Chiluba and other regional leaders to secure this ceasefire and to find a political solution which will protect the sovereignty of the DRC, ensure the rights and protection of all Congolese and address the security concerns of neighbouring countries.

An important part of the solution will be progress on reconciliation in Rwanda. Rwanda needs international support to help it achieve peace and reconciliation and I have agreed to provide £30 million in three annual grants to help. The rationale and objectives for our support to Rwanda are set out in my letter dated 26 January to you as the Chair of the All-Party Group on Rwanda. A copy of my letter has been placed in the Library of the House.

In Burundi, the Arusha peace process continues to make progress. The decision by regional Governments to lift the economic sanctions imposed on Burundi reflects the progress being made and is a positive step forward.

In the longer term there is a need to address the root causes of the conflict; re-unite the region; and promote development for long-term stability. We support the convening of an International Conference on Security and Co-operation under UN/OAU auspices to this end.

Tanzania

21. **Mrs. Gilroy:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she had about development when she visited Tanzania in 1998. [67527]

Clare Short: During my visit in August last year, I met with the President, ministers, politicians, officials and private sector, civil society and donor representatives and outlined Britain's new development policy. I visited various programmes and urged action to tackle corruption and speedy reform of the health and education sectors, where we have a major involvement and which are vital to improve the quality of basic services and to achieve our shared goal of poverty eradication.

St. Helena

23. **Mr. Bob Russell:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to visit the island of St. Helena to discuss the provision of air links and improved sea links. [67529]

Clare Short: I have no plans to visit St. Helena. Last year my Department and the St. Helena Government agreed the terms of a preliminary desk study into the technical viability of improving access, including possible air access, to St. Helena.

Angola

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement about the current humanitarian assistance to Angola. [67510]

Clare Short: The recent fighting in Angola has resulted in a significant increase in the numbers of internally displaced people. The United Nations is co-ordinating efforts to meet these needs. We will help where there is adequate access and safety for agencies to operate. Since the first UN Humanitarian Appeal for Angola in 1993 we have committed some £41 million bilateral emergency assistance to Angola.

Clean Water Supply

Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the impact of her Department's policies on accessibility and clean water supply in developing countries. [67514]

Clare Short: Access to clear, safe, water is a major focus for our programme as it is crucial to health, agriculture and freeing women and girls' time for education and production. We are giving increased focus to water and sanitation in our work. Worldwide 1½ billion people benefited from improved water supply during the UN Decade for water but 1 billion still lack access to clean water and 3 billion to sanitation. It is estimated that by 2025 1 in 3 people will be living in countries subject to chronic water scarcity unless water resources are used more efficiently.

Multilateral Agreement for Investment

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the current status of negotiations concerning the impact on developing countries of the planned Multilateral Agreement for Investment. [67506]

Clare Short: The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) announced on 3 December that negotiations on the proposed Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) had ended.

Discussions are continuing in the World Trade Organisation on the links between trade and investment, including the case for possible new multilateral rules on investment. These discussions are still at an analytical stage. My Department is working with the WTO Secretariat and United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) to help ensure developing countries have the support necessary to participate actively in the discussions.

Southern Sudan

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement about the cessation of funding from her Department to the non-governmental organisation Merlin working in Southern Sudan. [69029]

Clare Short: We funded the NGO Merlin for a 6 month programme of humanitarian assistance in Southern Sudan last August. This project ended on 31 January. As needs were much reduced, an extension of this project is not required.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to assist with the construction of secure roads and bridges in Southern Sudan. [69032]

Clare Short: Help to improve the infrastructure necessary to deliver food, including road and bridge repairs, is included in the UN World Food Programme's transport and delivery costs. We have paid the full costs associated with the provision of our food aid.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to assist with vaccination of children against measles and polio in Southern Sudan. [69031]

Clare Short: Our humanitarian assistance last year included an allocation of £125,000 towards the WHO Global Polio Eradication Programme.

The 1999 UN Consolidated Appeal covers the treatment of polio and measles. We are currently evaluating the Appeal document.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has for the continuation of humanitarian aid to Southern Sudan; and if she will make a statement. [69028]

Clare Short: We received the UN 1999 Consolidated Appeal for Sudan on 28 January and we are considering it carefully. We will make a statement as soon as possible.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement regarding funding by her Department of simple fishing equipment in Southern Sudan. [69030]

Clare Short: The provision of fishing equipment is included in the 1999 UN Consolidated Appeal. We are currently evaluating the Appeal document. I will write to the hon. Lady about difficulties over efforts to provide fishing equipment in the past.

Non-governmental Organisations

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development (1) if she will list the 10 UK based non-governmental organisations which received the greatest amounts of money from her Department in the year 1997–98; [68085]

(2) what percentage of her Department's budget was paid to United Kingdom non-governmental organisations in 1997–98. [68068]

Clare Short: The Department for International Development expenditure through UK NGOs was £172,336 million in 1997–98. This was 16.5 per cent. of the total Bilateral Programme or 8.4 per cent. of the total DFID programme for 1997–98.

I attach a list of the 10 NGOs who received the greatest amounts of money in 1997–98.

DFID expenditure through UK NGOs 1997–98

	£000
1. British Red Cross Society	23,351
2. Voluntary Services Overseas	20,274
3. Save the Children Fund	18,037
4. CARE International UK	12,348
5. OXFAM	10,498
6. Christian Aid	8,488
7. International Planned Parenthood Federation	6,017
8. London School of Hygiene	4,287
9. Medical Research Council	3,702
10. Marie Stopes International	3,103

Note:
Organisations registered as a charity with the Charity Commission in England or the Inland Revenue in Scotland, excluding the British Council which is a public body.

PRIME MINISTER

Life Peers

Sir John Stanley: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the total number of life peers that have been created since 1 May 1997, indicating the number that subsequently took the *(a)* Conservative Whip, *(b)* Labour Whip, *(c)* Liberal Whip, *(d)* other party whips and *(e)* sit on the Cross Benches in the House of Lords. [65029]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 11 January 1999]:* The information is as follows:

Life peers created since 1 May 1997

	Number
Labour	[1]63
Conservative	31
Liberal Democrat	17
Cross Bench	[2]6
Law Lords	4
Other	6
Total	[3]127

[1] Includes Baroness Lester, now deceased
[2] Excludes Law Lords who are listed separately
[3] Includes the Dissolution List

Overseas Publications

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list those articles he has written for foreign newspapers since becoming Prime Minister. [66375]

The Prime Minister: I have written for many overseas publications. Usually an article is circulated by my office, or the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, to overseas posts who then place the article in a newspaper in their country. We do not have a comprehensive list of these articles.

In addition, I have written a small number of articles on specific issues for foreign newspapers and journals. These include over the last year:

Stern (Germany): Europe
Welt Am Sonntag (Germany): Europe
DNES (Czech Republic): The Third Way
Wall Street Journal (USA): The Euro
The Sowetan: South Africa.

Joint Consultative Committee

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister if papers considered by the JCC are prepared by civil servants. [67475]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* The papers tabled by the Government are prepared by civil servants and approved by Ministers, as is routine for Government business.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Prime Minister how many ministerial visits have been made to each South American and Caribbean country by each Government Minister since 1 May 1997. [67332]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 27 January 1999]:* A fully updated list of Ministers who have undertaken individual official visits to Latin American and Caribbean countries over the 20 months since 1 May 1997 is listed below.

The purpose of these visits was to strengthen our bilateral relations, promote British interests and play our leading role in international affairs.

The rules on travel for Ministers are the same as those that applied under the previous Administration.

To ensure comprehensive coverage, a trawl has been undertaken across diplomatic posts in the regions. I regret that some of these visits were not included in earlier answers.

Argentina
Lord Clinton-Davis
Tony Banks MP
Baroness Blackstone
Tony Lloyd MP
The Rt Hon. John Prescott MP
Glenda Jackson CBE MP
The Rt Hon. Michael Meacher MP

Belize
Tony Lloyd MP

Brazil
Barbara Roche MP
Tony Lloyd MP
Baroness Blackstone
The Rt Hon. Peter Mandelson MP
Lord Clinton-Davis
Elliot Morley MP
George Foulkes MP
Nick Raynsford MP
The Rt Hon John Morris QC MP

Chile
Lord Clinton-Davis
Tony Lloyd MP

Colombia
Tony Lloyd MP (x2)
George Foulkes MP
The Rt Hon Nick Brown MP
Brian Wilson MP

Costa Rica
Tony Banks MP
Tony Lloyd MP
Lord McIntosh

Ecuador
The Rt Hon Nick Brown MP
Tony Lloyd MP

El Salvador
Tony Lloyd MP

Guatemala
Tony Lloyd MP

Mexico
The Rt Hon John Morris QC MP
Tony Lloyd MP (x2)

Panama
The Rt Hon Robin Cook MP

Paraguay
Tony Banks MP

Peru
Tony Lloyd MP

Uruguay
Tony Lloyd MP

Venezuela
Tony Lloyd MP

Caribbean Countries

Antigua and Barbuda
The Rt Hon Robin Cook MP
George Foulkes MP

Bahamas
The Rt Hon Robin Cook MP
Baroness Symons
George Foulkes MP

Barbados
The Rt Hon Clare Short MP
George Foulkes MP
The Rt Hon Frank Dobson MP
The Rt Hon John Morris QC MP

Cuba
Baroness Symons
Brian Wilson MP

Grenada
George Foulkes MP

Guyana
The Rt Hon Clare Short MP

Jamaica
Baroness Symons
The Rt Hon Michael Meacher MP

Trinidad and Tobago
Baroness Symons
Tony Banks MP
The Rt Hon the Lord Irvine of Lairg

St Lucia
The Rt Hon Jack Cunningham MP.

All visits were in accordance with the rules set out in the Ministerial Code.

Maxwell Pensions

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Prime Minister what briefings he has received from civil servants or Ministers on the former Paymaster General, the hon Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson), and Maxwell pensions. [67320]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 27 January 1999]:* Whether or not such briefings have been provided, it is established practice under successive administrations not to disclose details of confidential discussions between Ministers or advice received from civil servants.

Genetically Modified Food

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Prime Minister (1) what discussions he has had with President Clinton about genetically modified food; [68433]

(2) what representations he has received from industry about genetically modified food. [68432]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) on 3 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *471–72.*

Official Histories

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Prime Minister how many Government-sponsored official histories are currently in preparation; when each was commissioned; who are the authors; what are the estimated dates of completion; and what is the estimated cost in each case. [68213]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 1 February 1999]:* The original programme of official histories, commissioned by the War Cabinet and covering military and civil histories of the second world war, was extended in 1966 by the then Prime Minister to include selected periods of episodes of peacetime history. The following are currently in preparation:

Title	*Author*	*Date commissioned*	*Estimated publication date*
UK Accession to the EEC Volume 1	Professor Alan Milward	1993	1999
UK Accession to the EEC Volume 2	Professor Alan Milward	1997	2006
Falklands Campaign	Professor Lawrence Freedman	1997	2002
North Sea Oil and Gas	Professor Alexander Kemp	1999	2004
External Economic Policy since the World War volume 2	Professor Leslie Pressnell	1974	2000
Defence Organisation since the War	Professor Donald Cameron Watt	1974	2000
SOE in Europe	Professor W. Mackenzie (edited and introduced by M. R. D. Foot)	1998	1999
SOE in the Low Countries	Professor M. R. D. Foot	1987	1999
SOE in Italy	Christopher Woods	1989	2000
SOE in Greece	Professor Richard Clogg	1984	2000

The cost of preparing official histories is borne mainly by the Cabinet Office with royalties payable by the publisher offsetting the costs. It is not possible without disproportionate cost to itemise the cost of all the individual histories.

Iraq

Mr. Trend: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 14 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *266*, to the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), what was the basis for his statement that the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) had argued that action against Saddam Hussein should be taken only if he were removed from power. [68721]

The Prime Minister: In public statements following Operation Desert Fox the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) said that the removal of Saddam Hussein from office should become "a clear policy objective".

Oman

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to visit Oman. [68786]

The Prime Minister: There are no plans at present. However, the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Leeds, Central (Mr. Fatchett), hopes to make a visit in the near future.

Yemen

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Prime Minister what recent communications he has received from the President of Yemen; and if he will make a statement. [68846]

The Prime Minister: I have received no communication from the President of Yemen since November 1997. I have, however, asked my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary to keep me fully apprised of developments in Yemen. We were delighted to hear the news yesterday that Mr. and Mrs. Rosser and the other Dutch captives have been released safe and well after their kidnap ordeal which began on 17 January. I have asked to be kept informed of our assiduous efforts to provide proper consular services for the eight UK nationals recently detained in Yemen on alleged terrorist charges.

India

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to visit India; and if he will make a statement on bilateral relations. [68784]

The Prime Minister: I have no current plans to visit India. However, we have regular and bilateral dialogue on a wide variety of issues of mutual interest and my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury is currently making a visit to India.

Non-government Bodies

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the appointments to non-government bodies he has made since 1 January. [68785]

The Prime Minister: The right hon. the Baroness Williams of Crosby and the right hon. the Lord Mayhew of Twysden took up appointments as members of the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments with effect from 1 January. Lord Gillmore of Thamesfield was appointed Chairman of the Committee with effect from 1 February.

Acheson Report

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Prime Minister (1) which of his Ministers is co-ordinating the Government response to the Acheson report; [68938]

(2) if the Acheson report will be submitted to the Social Exclusion Unit. [68939]

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health is co-ordinating work across Government to reduce health inequalities. This includes follow-up of the report of the independent inquiry into health inequalities, led by Sir Donald Acheson which he commissioned. A range of initiatives by other Departments, including aspects of the Social Exclusion Unit's strategy for neighbourhood renewal, is already helping to give effect to a number of Sir Donald's recommendations. The Government's response to the Acheson Inquiry's report will be included in a White Paper on the Government's new health strategy and will be published shortly.

Engagements

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 3 February. [68570]

The Prime Minister: This morning I had meetings with Ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House I will have further such meetings later today.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Radio Authority

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if he will list the members of the Radio Authority; who appoints them; what is their period of appointment; and what are the terms of reference of the authority; [67679]

(2) if he will list the members of the Radio Authority from ethnic minorities. [67683]

Janet Anderson: The Radio Authority was established under the Broadcasting Act 1990 to licence and regulate independent radio services in the UK. The Authority is responsible for interpreting its statutory duties under the Broadcasting Acts 1990 and 1996, and is independent of Government.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State appoints members of the Radio Authority. It is not the Department's current policy to reveal details of an individual's ethnic origin, but only to collect information for monitoring purposes. The present Radio Authority Members, with their period of appointment are as follows:

Members	*Period of appointment*
Sir Peter Gibbings (Chairman)	1 January 1995 to 31 December 1999
Mr. Michael Moriarty (Deputy Chairman)	18 January 1996 to 17 January 2000
Ms Sheila Hewitt	1 December 1998 to 30 November 2003
Mr. Andrew Reid	16 August 1994 to 15 August 1999
Mr. Michael Reupke	18 May 1994 to 17 May 1999
Mr. Fergal Sharkey	1 December 1998 to 30 November 2003
Lady Sheil	16 August 1994 to 15 August 1999
Mrs. Helen Tennant	1 December 1995 to 30 November 2000
Mr. David Witherow	1 January 1998 to 30 November 2003

Tourism (North-west)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what is the projected annual revenue from tourism in the north-west in each of the next three years. [68475]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 1 February 1999]:* While we do not make detailed predictions of what future earnings from tourism may be for any region of the UK, an increase on the 1997 total revenue of £1,490 million is expected. One of the aims of our new strategy, to be published on 26 February 1999, will be to ensure that tourism delivers the greatest possible benefits both to local communities and the economy as a whole.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the benefits which result in the north-west from Government funding to the North West Tourist Board; and what checks are made to see whether value for money is achieved. [68474]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 1 February 1999]:* The North West Tourist Board receives Government funding through the English Tourist Board (ETB) which is responsible for ensuring that it is spent effectively delivering the programmes agreed. Clear measurement of performance and delivery is required.

As we announced on 14 December 1998, as well as establishing a new national strategic body for tourism in England, we shall be directing more resources for the support of tourism in the English regions.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to bring in grants to create new jobs and attractions in the tourist industry in the north-west. [68477]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 1 February 1999]:* My Department has no plans to introduce any new grants. However, tourism in the north-west has benefited, both directly and indirectly, from National Lottery funding (nearly £450 million in total has gone to the region) and from support under the European Regional Development Fund.

DEFENCE

Sully Hospital (Land Decontamination)

Mr. John Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will estimate the value of his Department's land adjacent to Sully Hospital in the Vale of Glamorgan after the site has been decontaminated. [67863]

Mr. Spellar: I do not consider it appropriate to place a value on this site before it is brought to the market in late spring this year. The value of the site is best determined by the market, in full possession of the site details.

Military Bases (Children)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions he has had with senior officers of the Armed Services on their responsibilities in ensuring the welfare and protection of young children living with families on military bases; and if he will make a statement. [68047]

Mr. Spellar: No specific discussion have been held between Ministers and Senior Officers on their responsibilities in ensuring the welfare and protection of young children living on military bases. The Ministry of Defence does, however, takes very seriously its responsibilities of duty of care towards its personnel and their dependants. Commanding Officers are made well aware of their duty towards the welfare of all personnel and their dependants, through instructions issued through the chain of Command.

In the United Kingdom, the Ministry of Defence does not have statutory responsibility in matters of child welfare and protection. This responsibility falls to the relevant local authority. Under the Children Act 1989, it is the statutory duty of the local authority, to investigate cases where it believes a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, harm. Service authorities are, however, required to notify the local Director of Social Services off any cases of abuse of which they become aware and any further action is to be taken in collaboration with the other agencies involved.

Overseas, the Ministry of Defence acts as a de facto local authority and replicates those statutory responsibilities falling to local authorities in the United Kingdom. All statutory health care and social services are provided for, and on behalf of, the Department under contract by the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association—Forces Help, which employs appropriately qualified social work staff. The SSAFA-FH social work service works in close co-operation with military authorities, Service police, medical and health professionals in accordance with Defence Council Instructions and The Armed Forces (Protection of Children of Service Families) Regulations 1996.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many children living in military-based accommodation have been the subject of reports by senior officers as to their welfare and protection in each of the last three years. [67987]

Mr. Spellar: Information of the nature requested is not held centrally by my Department. Within the United Kingdom, statutory responsibility in matters of welfare and protection of children of Service families rests with local authorities.

Overseas, where the Ministry of Defence assumes the responsibilities of a local authority, the following numbers of children were placed on Child Protection Registers for the years 1996, 1997 and 1998:

Year	*Number*
1996	51
1997	46
1998	58

Numbers of children overseas, subject to child protection inquiries, or the subject of concern, but whose names were not placed on the Child Protection Register, for the years 1996, 1997 and 1998 are as follows:

Year	*Number*
1996	41
1997	76
1998	82

Exports (Saudi Arabia)

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the *(a)* military, *(b)* security and *(c)* police equipment exported to Saudi Arabia by British Aerospace as prime contractor for the Al-Yamamah agreement, that was exempt from export licence requirement. [68200]

Mr. George Robertson: Al-Yamamah is a Government to Government programme for the supply of Tornado and Hawk aircraft, Minehunters, associated infrastructure and armaments, and support equipment, including spares. All supplies under this programme are exempt from export licensing.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many electro-shock batons were transferred via the United Kingdom to Saudi Arabia as part of the Al-Yamamah deal. [68221]

Mr. George Robertson: No electronic shock batons have been supplied under the Al-Yamamah programme.

Trident (Successor)

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he plans to make a decision on a successor system to Trident. [68837]

Mr. George Robertson: No decision on any successor system to Trident will be needed for several years. Any decision on a successor to Trident would be taken in the light of progress towards the Government's goal of verifiable global nuclear disarmament.

Captured Weapons

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his Department's policy relating to the retention or disposal of captured military weapons and equipment. [68212]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 1 February 1999]:* Decisions on how to deal with captured military weapons and equipment would be taken in the light of circumstances at the time. Disposal of such material by scrapping or sale for further use is subject to the same

stringent political and security constraints as apply to the disposal of surplus military equipment from our own inventory.

Sudan

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what response Her Majesty's Government gave to the letter of the Sudanese Minister of Foreign Affairs of 27 October 1998 asking for clarification of his comments made on 23 October, to the effect that Her Majesty's Government had independent evidence that the Al Shifa factory in Khartoum was making chemical or biological weapons before the United States air strike. [68860]

Mr. George Robertson *[holding answer 2 February 1999]:* Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials have discussed with Sudanese counterparts the points raised in Dr. Mustafa Osman Ismail's letter on a number of occasions. As we have said on several occasions, the United States told us at the time of its action last August that it had based its decision to act on compelling evidence.

Kosovo

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the mission statement for the Kosovo extraction force based in Macedonia. [68802]

Mr. George Robertson: The exact mission statement of the NATO-led Extraction force, operation "Joint Guarantor" is classified. However, I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on 18 January 1999, *Official Report*, column 578, to the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson).

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library the report from the British contingent in the Kosovo Verification Mission on the circumstances of the recent killings. [68758]

Mr. George Robertson: In December 1998, the British contingent of verifiers became the first to be fully integrated into the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Kosovo Verification Mission and does not, therefore, produce separate reports. Reports by the Kosovo Verification Mission, including those covering the Racak killings, are not releasable beyond the OSCE and it is therefore not possible to place a copy in the Library.

The circumstances of the Racak killings were, however, covered in a statement made by the Chairman of the Permanent Council of the OSCE on 18 January, and I am arranging to place a copy in the Library of the House.

Operational Costs

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what are the estimated costs of *(a)* Operation Deliberate Forge, *(b)* Operation Radome and *(c)* Operation Kingower; how the costs will be apportioned between (i) named international bodies and (ii) named countries; and if the costs to the United Kingdom will be met from his Department's budget or from the Government's contingency funds; [68254]

(2) what is the cost to date of the NATO extraction force in Macedonia; and how the cost is divided between the participating states. [68253]

Mr. George Robertson: Operation Kingower is the name given to the United Kingdom planning for support of any action that may be undertaken in Kosovo. It incorporates a range of operations including Operation Radome, which is the UK contribution to the NATO Kosovo Air Verification Mission, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe Kosovo Verification Mission and the NATO Kosovo Extraction Force. Operation Deliberate Forge is the UK contribution to NATO air operations over Bosnia.

We calculate that the extra costs to Defence Votes of the activities covered by Operation Kingower will amount to some £7 million in the current financial year; the costs of Operation Deliberate Forge in same period are likely to amount to some £10 million. These operations are funded on a national basis. Their costs were included in the overall forecast of costs for unprogrammed overseas operations in the current financial year for which the Secretary of State has sought a contribution from the Reserve.

Multi-launch Rocket System

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the multi-launch rocket system future phase one rocket (FFOR); and if he will list the project milestones. [68756]

Mr. Spellar: The Future Phase One Rocket project has been re-titled the Guided Multiple-Launched Rocket System programme. The United Kingdom is participating in a five-nation collaborative Engineering and Manufacturing Development contract, which was placed by the United States Government in November 1998. On current plans, this collaborative programme will start initial production in 2004, with initial deliveries to the UK in 2006. The system is expected to enter UK service in 2010.

Project Horizon

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what assessments he has made of building a new national warship following a decision to withdraw from Project Horizon; [68515]

(2) what assessment he has made of the cost of withdrawing from Project Horizon. [68514]

Mr. George Robertson: We have made no decision to withdraw from Project Horizon. I am urgently addressing the way forward with our French and Italian partners.

A preliminary assessment has indicated that, as an alternative to Project Horizon, a national warship option, together with the continued collaborative development of the PAAMS anti-air missile system, could provide the Royal Navy with the capability it needs, in an affordable and effective manner.

Iraq

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which nations participate in the patrolling of the northern

and southern no-fly zones in Iraq; what has been the total cost of the operations to date; and how the cost is apportioned between each nation. [68249]

Mr. George Robertson: Both British and United States aircraft currently patrol the No-Fly Zones. Since patrolling of the northern and southern No-Fly-Zones began (in 1991 and 1992 respectively), the extra costs of UK participation amount to some £70 million. It is not possible to confirm costs for the US contribution.

Gulf Forces

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what has been the cost each year since 1991 of the deployment of British Forces to the Gulf. [68250]

Mr. George Robertson: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what has been the total cost of the SFOR de-mining programme in Bosnia and Herzegovina. [68252]

Mr. George Robertson: SFOR does not have a "de-mining programme" and does not undertake de-mining in Bosnia and Herzegovina other than in support of its own operations. Under the General Framework Agreement for Peace (the Dayton Accords) the responsibility for mine clearance lies with the Entity Armed Forces. SFOR's involvement is limited to monitoring their progress and to the provision of mine awareness training.

Albania

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when NATO's standing Mediterranean force, Stanavformed, visited the Albanian port of Durres; and what was the purpose of the visit. [68803]

Mr. George Robertson: Elements of Standing Naval Force Mediterranean visited Durres, Albania from 8 to 10 July 1998. The visit was a demonstration of co-operation within Partnership for Peace with Albania.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if NATO's partnership for peace activities in Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia have been *(a)* fulfilled, *(b)* extended and *(c)* expanded. [68760]

Mr. George Robertson: NATO/Partnership for Peace (PfP) activities in Albania and Macedonia have expanded in line with NATO's wider efforts to stabilise Albania, Macedonia and regional security. The development of PfP Exercise Co-operative Best Effort 98 in Macedonia and PfP Exercise Co-operative Assembly 98 in Albania are two examples; as is the recent extension of the mandate and staff numbers of the NATO/PfP Co-ordination Cell in Albania. As part of an expanded series of expert team visits to both countries, the United Kingdom has contributed to a PfP logistics seminar in Macedonia and an Explosive Ordnance Disposal Training Team to Albania.

Operation Desert Fox

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was *(a)* the total cost and *(b)* the average daily cost to the United Kingdom of Operation Desert Fox. [68248]

Mr. George Robertson: The extra cost to the United Kingdom of Operation Desert Fox was £3 million. UK participation in the operation lasted for three days, giving an average daily cost of some £1 million.

Nerve Gas Attacks (Japan)

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 17 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *651*, regarding nerve gas attacks, if the chemical and biological defence sector will undertake to analyse and assess the results of the Japanese long-term follow-up programme once they are published. [67628]

Mr. Spellar: The Government will undertake an analysis and assessment of the data once these are published.

Disposal Sales Agency

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the private companies that ship Disposal Sales Agency equipment overseas. [68199]

Mr. Spellar: The Disposal Sales Agency does not employ private companies to ship equipment abroad. All sales are based on the "as and where lying" principle, which puts the responsibility on the buyer for collection from the location of disposal.

Private companies may subsequently export the equipment under licence but, in doing so, make their own arrangements for shipping.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the Disposal Sales Agency uses MOD airfields to export goods. [68193]

Mr. Spellar: No. The DSA offer surplus military equipment to the home and overseas market on an "as and where lying" basis and the responsibility for collection from MOD premises is with the buyer.

Propellants

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence from whom tenders for propellant for *(a)* Seawolf, *(b)* Sea Skua, *(c)* Starstreak, *(d)* ASRAAM, *(e)* Rapier and *(f)* MR Trigat have been invited. [68079]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 1 February 1999]:* Except in the case of Sea Skua, supply of propellant for the missile systems listed is the responsibility of the relevant prime contractors. For Sea Skua, the MOD has contracted directly with Royal Ordnance Summerfield for refurbishment of the rocket motors.

Chapelcross and Calderhall Reactors

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the forecast operational life of the reactors at Chapelcross and Calderhall. [68835]

Mr. Spellar: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave him on 28 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns *328–29*.

Short Range Air Defence Systems

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on Future Short and Very Short Range Air Defence Systems; and if he will list the project milestones. [68511]

Mr. Spellar: The Future Very Short and Short Range Air Defence Missile System is intended to succeed the Rapier and High Velocity Missile systems. Feasibility Studies have been carried out under an 8 nation Memorandum of Understanding, for which UK is the pilot nation. On current plans, future studies will be conducted prior to approval of the Assessment phase, which will be sought in 2001. Approval for the Demonstration and Production phase is planned for 2006.

Air Missiles

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the beyond visual range air-to-air missile; and if he will list the project milestones. [68504]

Mr. Spellar: We are currently evaluating proposals from Matra BAe Dynamics, on behalf of a European consortium consisting of DASA LFK, Alenia, Saab and CASA, and from Raytheon Systems Ltd., to meet our requirement for a Beyond Visual Range Air-to-Air Missile for Eurofighter.

We hope to announce the award of a contract to the successful bidder later this year. In advance of this decision it is not possible to give any useful information on the likely project milestones.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the conventionally armed stand off missile; and if he will list the project milestones. [68502]

Mr. Spellar: The RAF have a requirement for a highly effective stand off weapon to attack high value fixed targets while minimising the risk of aircraft losses and civilian casualties. Following an international competition involving seven companies, a development and production contract was awarded in February 1997 to Matra BAe (UK) Ltd for their Storm Shadow missile. It is intended to be fitted on Tornado GR4, Harrier GR7 and Eurofighter. The major programme milestone is to finalise development and commence production in the spring/summer of 2001.

Anti-tank Guided Weapon System

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the Medium Range Third-Generation Anti-Tank Guided Weapon System; and if he will list the project milestones. [68506]

Mr. Spellar: Medium Range TRIGAT is a collaborative programme with France, Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands to meet our Medium Range Anti-Tank Guided Weapon System requirement. It is in the later stages of development and we are currently considering whether to participate in the production phase.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Thames Barrier

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what estimate he has made of the date by which the Thames Barrier will no longer fulfil its primary function; and if he will make a statement. [68053]

Mr. Morley: I have been asked to reply.

The Thames Barrier is a robust and flexible installation with a design based on rates of sea level rise predicted in the 1970s which were higher than those currently anticipated. It provides London with a high level of protection from tidal flooding and with normal care and maintenance should continue to do so until at least the latter part of the next century. Even then, although the barrier may need to be closed more frequently it will continue to fulfil its primary function.

The Environment Agency is currently considering the wider long-term flood defence needs of London in consultation with interested parties.

Magistrates Courts

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what action has been taken by *(a)* his Department and *(b)* HM Magistrates Courts Service Inspectorate from January 1996 to date in respect of reported incidents of fraud or gross mismanagement in relation to payments by or funding of magistrates' courts committees. [68720]

Mr. Hoon: Two incidents have arisen since 1 January 1996. The first was investigated by the Department's Internal Audit Division but was resolved without the Department having to take action. The second has not yet been resolved. There have been exchanges between the Department, the Inspectorate, the Magistrates Courts Committee and the paying authority and advice has been given and recommendations made. What further action is needed will depend on decisions by the Magistrates Courts Committee and the paying authority in the light of legal advice they have taken.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the incidents of fraud or gross mismanagement that have been brought to the attention of the Lord Chancellor's Department or Her Majesty's Magistrates Courts Service Inspectorate relating to payments by and funding of magistrates courts committees from 1 January 1996 to date. [68719]

Mr. Hoon: Since 1 January 1996, there have been two incidents relating to payments by and funding of Magistrates Courts Committees which have been brought to the attention of the Lord Chancellor's Department or Her Majesty's Magistrates Courts Service Inspectorate. In the first case there was no loss to public funds and there were no proceedings for fraud. In the second case, both the Magistrates Courts Committee and the paying authority have taken legal advice and the matter has yet to be resolved.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what steps he proposes to take to reform the system of financial and administrative accountability of magistrates courts committees; and what steps he plans to take to implement the recommendations of the Magistrates Courts Service Inspectorate Thematic Review of May 1998. [68752]

Mr. Hoon: We have issued guidance on the content of Magistrates Courts Committee published annual reports which are the principal means by which committees account to their paying authorities, to the Lord Chancellor and to the public. We will take forward the recommendations of the MCSI's thematic review in consultation with the Inspectorate themselves, the Central Council of Magistrates Courts Committees and the Local Government Association.

SCOTLAND

Waiting Lists

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the *(a)* surgical waiting list figures and *(b)* specialist outpatient consultation figures for Scotland for (i) March 1997, (ii) September 1997, (iii) March 1998 and (iv) September 1998. [66886]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 25 January 1999]:* Information on the number of patients on the inpatient/day case waiting list for surgical specialties, on the dates requested, is given in Table 1.

Information on waiting lists is collected centrally only for hospital inpatients and day cases. Data are available on first outpatient referrals and the length of time that patients waited for their first outpatient appointment. The percentage of patients who received a first outpatient appointment within 9 weeks and 18 weeks following a General Medical Practitioner/General Dental Practitioner referral, for the quarters requested, is provided in Table 2.

From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Table 1

NHS in Scotland: Inpatient and day case waiting list

Date	*Number on waiting list for surgical specialties* [1]	*Total Number on waiting list*
31 March 1997	68,562	84,649
30 September 1997	69,213	84,981
31 March 1998	71,797	89,525
30 September 1998	67,620	84,931

[1] Surgical Specialties comprises general surgery (excluding vascular), vascular surgery, accident and emergency, anaesthetics, cardiothoracic surgery, cardiac surgery, thoracic surgery, ear nose and throat (ENT), neurosurgery, ophthalmology, orthopaedics, plastic surgery and surgical paediatrics.

Source:

Form SMR3, ISD Scotland.

Table 2

NHS in Scotland: Percentage of patients who received a first outpatient appointment within 9 weeks and within 18 weeks of referral [1]

Date	*Percentage seen within 9 weeks*	*Percentage seen within 18 weeks*
31 March 1997	70.7	91.2
30 September 1997	66.5	91.7
31 March 1998	68.3	90.2
30 September 1998[1]	64.6	89.8

[1] Provisional

Source:

Form SMR0/SMR01, ISD Scotland

Skye Bridge

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, pursuant to his answer of 18 January 1998, *Official Report*, column *358*, on the Skye Bridge Toll Order, if a copy of the Assignation Statement was made available for inspection with the Order from 26 June to 7 August 1992. [67968]

Mr. Macdonald: No. Paragraph 14A(3) of Schedule 1 to the Roads (Scotland) Act 1984 only requires the Assignation Statement to be made available with the draft Order. This was done from 1 November to 13 December 1991.

From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Scottish Natural Heritage

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he expects Scottish Natural Heritage to bring forward detailed proposals to widen access to the countryside in Scotland. [68051]

Mr. Macdonald: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland asked Scottish Natural Heritage to advise him on whether changes in legislation were required to provide greater opportunity for people to enjoy the countryside. Scottish Natural Heritage published its advice early this year and we announced our response on 2 February 1999.

From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Departmental Responsibilities

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what responsibilities which his Department had prior to the Comprehensive Spending Review are to be *(a)* discontinued by his Department, *(b)* transferred to another department, *(c)* transferred to an executive agency and *(d)* added to his Department over the period 1998–99 to 2001–02. [68397]

Mr. Dewar: Almost all of the current responsibilities of The Scottish Office and its agencies and associated departments will, from 1 July 1999, be the responsibility of Scottish Ministers following devolution. Scottish Ministers will also assume responsibilities which currently fall to other Government Departments.

Departmental Legislation

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what additional legislation, not currently before Parliament, was assumed in the production of his Department's spending allocation for 1999–2000 to 2001–02 in the Comprehensive Spending Review. [68413]

Mr. Dewar: There is a long-standing convention that legislative proposals for each year are not announced before the Queen's Speech at the start of the relevant Session.

From 1 July 1999 most Scottish legislation will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Housing Repairs

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how much was spent by the councils of *(a)* Edinburgh, *(b)* Glasgow, *(c)* Aberdeen and *(d)* Dundee on assistance to private sector housing repairs, indicating separately (i) replacement of lead water pipes and (ii) adaptations to help people with disabilities in each of the past 10 years. [68536]

Mr. Macdonald: Total expenditure on private sector grants in the most recent 10 years for which information is available is as follows. Grant expenditure on replacing lead pipes and adaptations for disabled people is not recorded separately.

Private sector repair grants: 1988 to 1997

Amount of Grant paid (£000)

Year	*Aberdeen*	*Dundee*	*Edinburgh*	*Glasgow*
1988	787	934	31,138	19,886
1989	751	658	15,209	30,197
1990	824	1,022	26,476	18,691
1991	1,365	1,115	10,289	13,932
1992	1,121	1,175	19,138	13,723
1993	510	1,075	10,868	10,587
1994	307	1,137	6,140	11,105
1995	599	1,957	12,169	1,019
1996	976	1,531	3,274	2,396
1997	382	1,335	1,149	2,763

Housing (Disabled People)

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what proposals he has to ensure that enough ground floor dwellings remain in public sector housing to enable houses adapted for occupation by people with disabilities to be provided to those who need them. [68534]

Mr. Macdonald: A range of policies is in place with the aim of ensuring adequate housing provision in the future for people with disabilities.

All new housing funded by Scottish Homes will have to be built to barrier free standards that are contained within the Agency's new housing design guidance. We have also proposed amendments to the building regulations for all new dwellings which will address issues such as access, the provision of a downstairs WC, corridor and door widths, turning circles, sockets and switches.

There are a number of safeguards within the right-to-buy provisions to enable local authorities to retain houses required for specific purposes. Under Section 61(4) of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987, the right to buy does not apply to groups of houses provided with facilities designed or adapted for the needs of elderly or disabled people. These properties are generally known as sheltered housing.

Section 69 of the Act allows public sector landlords to apply to the Secretary of State for permission to refuse to sell individual houses with features suitable for occupation by persons of pensionable age. Such houses must have facilities which are substantially different to those of an ordinary house.

From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Domestic Water Supply

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what proposals he has *(a)* to give the latest EU directive allowing less lead in domestic water supplies legal effect and *(b)* to provide funding to those councils which are already trying to operate within the new directive. [68535]

Mr. Macdonald: The UK is required to transpose the standards set in the new EU drinking water directive into national law by 25 December 2000. Any new burden on local authorities arising from the directive will be discussed within the Expenditure Committee of the Working Party on Local Government Finance.

From 1 July 1999 this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

A9 (Improvement Scheme)

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is the estimated cost of the proposed A9 improvement scheme, Helmsdale to the Ord of Caithness. [68993]

Mr. Macdonald: £11.4 million excluding Value Added Tax.

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will place in the Library a copy of the Government's preferred engineering scheme for the A9, Helmsdale to the Ord of Caithness, currently under assessment as part of the Trunk Road Review. [68991]

Mr. Macdonald: I have today arranged for a copy of the plan and profile of the preferred route to be placed in the Library.

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is the status of the *(a)* Brora bypass, *(b)* Portgower-Green Park and *(c)* Craickaig-Culgower proposed A9 improvement schemes. [68992]

Mr. Macdonald: The Brora bypass, Portgower to Green Park and Crackaig to Culgower schemes were progressed to outline feasibility stage in the early 1990s. However in 1995 the Government announced the A9 Dornoch to Scrabster Route Action Plan (RAP). The objectives of this plan were to consider (i) road safety, (ii) consistent journey times, (iii) improved overtaking opportunities, and (iv) traffic calming through the communities. The 3 schemes are being assessed against this criteria. Improvement schemes identified in the RAP will be implemented subject to competing priorities on the trunk road network and the availability of appropriate levels of funding.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Local Deprivation Indicators

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment which measures of local deprivation his Department and its agencies use in considering allocation of funds to local projects. [66718]

Mr. Andrew Smith: This Department's policies are central to local activity in addressing social exclusion and in stimulating the regeneration of deprived communities. As well as our mainstream funding of education and employment initiatives, the Department leads on a number of local area-based initiatives which aim to raise educational standards, improve skills and employability and encourage lifelong learning. This Department is keen to ensure that disadvantaged communities benefit, and therefore includes measures of deprivation when selecting areas in which initiatives will operate. As well as using a variety of data sources, including the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' Index of Deprivation, the Department also recognises that the identification of pockets of deprivation in otherwise non-deprived areas needs local knowledge.

The range of indices used for each initiative varies depending on the policy objectives, as the following examples illustrate.

(i) Assessment of Education Action Zones draws on indicators of deprivation at school level, such as eligibility for free school meals.

(ii) The second round of New Start partnerships which are focused on areas which show relatively high levels of disengagement from learning by young people. Government Offices also used information available to them on levels of deprivation to select the project areas.

(iii) The selection of Employment Zones used indices based on the level of long-term unemployment (12 months and over, and 18 months and over) and the local employment rate.

The selection of successful bids for running most pilots or area-based initiatives is also based on the quality of plans and feasibility of proposals. A final criterion for selecting pilot areas is an assessment of what is already happening in the area to avoid partnerships being overburdened by the bureaucracy involved in participating in different initiatives. This Department is very supportive of the DETR's work in improving the co-ordination of area-based initiatives so that communities can benefit from a coherent approach to regeneration in their area.

New Deal

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many persons aged 18 to 24 years have started the New Deal since its inception; [66964]

(2) how many persons aged 18 to 24 years have *(a)* been invited to join the New Deal and *(b)* failed to keep their appointments following such an invitation; [66965]

(3) how many persons aged 18 to 24 years who started the New Deal subsequently *(a)* dropped out and *(b)* failed to complete the arrangements for any other reasons; [66966]

(4) how many entrants to the New Deal have completed the arrangements and been placed in *(a)* subsidised employment, *(b)* training, *(c)* the environmental task force and *(d)* the voluntary sector; [66967]

(5) how many offenders who are subject to supervision by the Probation Service have *(a)* commenced the New Deal and *(b)* completed the arrangements. [66968]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. James Clappison, dated 1 February 1999:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has asked me to reply direct to your questions regarding the progress of New Deal for young people aged 18 to 24. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

The latest Government Statistical Service (GSS) figures to the end of November 1998 and provisional Management Information to the end of December 1998 showed that over 213,320 young people had started the New Deal for 18 to 24 year olds. This includes those invited to join New Deal but who ceased to claim Jobseeker's Allowance before their first New Deal interview. Of the total, 13,660 had entered the Employment option; 27,070 and entered Full-Time Education and Training; 7,130 had joined the Environment Task Force; and 7,660 had joined the Voluntary Sector option. Based on the Government Statistical Service figures, of the young people who had left New Deal by the end of November, 40,660 had moved into unsubsidised jobs; 10,050 had left to claim other benefits, 7,450 had left Jobseeker's Allowance to other known destinations and 22,760 to unknown destinations.

You have also requested details on ex-offenders as a specific group of people. I should explain that offenders, ex-offenders and those on probation do not have to declare their status to the Employment Service except when requesting early entry onto an employment programme, including New Deal. The latest GSS figures to the end of November 1998 show that 3,505 young people in these categories had requested early entry to New Deal. At present we do not separately monitor this group of entrants by outcome.

Of the 203,100 young people who had started New Deal by the end of November 14,170 signed off Jobseeker's Allowance before attending their initial appointment.

I hope this is helpful.

Training and Enterprise Councils

Mr. Alan Keen: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when his Department expects training and enterprise councils to be able to invite bids for adult training in the financial year 1999–2000. [68723]

Mr. Mudie: The planning round for work based learning for adults is under way now. The Secretary of State wrote to all TEC Chairs on 18 January 1999 to give details of national budgets and targets for TEC managed programmes.

Standards and Effectiveness Unit

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many staff are currently employed in the Standards and Effectiveness Unit in his Department; and what is the budgeted cost of the Unit for 1998–99. [68934]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 2 February 1999]:* As at 30 December 1998, the total number of people employed in the Standards and Effectiveness Unit was 143. The complement is drawn mainly from existing Civil Servants together with some 14 members of staff who have recent experience of the wider world of education such as headteachers, researchers and inspectors.

The total budgeted cost of the Unit for this financial year is £4.8m.

Grant-maintained Schools

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will ensure that the funding per pupil in grant maintained schools for 1999–2000 is increased in line with inflation; and if he will make a statement. [68866]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 2 February 1999]:* Grant-maintained schools' recurrent funding per pupil for 1999–2000 will be protected at its 1998–99 level in cash terms. Where a grant-maintained school's budget for 1999–2000, as calculated through its local education authority's Fair Funding allocation formula, is greater than its protected level of funding, calculated from its 1998–99 funding per pupil, it will receive that higher amount.

The policy of protection against undue turbulence continues a process of managing the transition of grant-maintained schools' budget arrangements into alignment with those for other schools begun by the previous Government, which set in hand a phased removal of the cash protection applied to the central element of annual maintenance grant.

Teacher Training Agency

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he proposes to undertake a review of the Teacher Training Agency. [69145]

Ms Estelle Morris: In accordance with the Government's policy of conducting quinquennial reviews of all non-departmental public bodies, the Department is launching today, in conjunction with the Welsh Office, a review of the Teacher Training Agency. Following Cabinet Office guidelines, the first stage of the review will take the form of a "prior options" study with the following terms of reference:

1. to review the Teacher Training Agency's functions, and the likely future need for those functions;
2. To consider the powers, remit, constitutional status, membership and activities of the Teacher Training Agency;
3. to consider whether, on efficiency grounds, some or all of the functions of the Teacher Training Agency can be carried out within an alternative organisational framework including by another public, private or voluntary sector body or otherwise within government;
4. to review the efficiency and effectiveness of the Teacher Training Agency in carrying out its functions.

We have asked that the review should have particular regard to:

the establishment next year of the General Teaching Councils for England and for Wales and of the National College for School Leadership; and

the major agenda for modernisation of the teaching profession set out in the recent Green Papers for England and for Wales on which the government is currently consulting.

We should welcome comments on those matters to be covered by the review from all those with an interest in the Teacher Training Agency's work. Comments, which may be made public unless respondents specifically request otherwise, should be sent by Friday 12 March 1999 to:

Graham Holley
Teachers Group
Department for Education and Employment
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
Westminster
London SW1P 3BT.

We have asked that this first stage of the review should be completed by 30 April 1999. The findings will be published and made available to Parliament.

Teachers

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list, for each of the last three years, the percentage of full-time and part-time teaching staff in *(a)* schools and *(b)* further education colleges without a first degree. [68731]

Ms Estelle Morris: Teachers in maintained nursery, primary, secondary and special schools in England, without a first degree or equivalent are as follows:

Percentage

	Full-time	*Part-time*
31 March 1995	40	51
31 March 1996	38	49
31 March 1997[1]	36	47

[1] 1997 data are provisional

Teaching staff in further education colleges in England, without a first degree or equivalent are as follows:

Percentage

	Full-time	*Part-time*
1994–95	25	21
1995–96	26	23
1996–97	26	24

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list, for each of the last three years, the percentage of full-time and part-time teaching staff in *(a)* schools and *(b)* further education colleges with a postgraduate certificate in education. [68732]

Ms Estelle Morris: Teachers in maintained nursery, primary, secondary and special schools, in England, with a postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE) for schools are as follows:

Percentage

	31 March 1995	*31 March 1996*	*31 March 1997*[1]
Full-time	30	32	33
Part-time	25	26	28

[1] 1997 data are provisional

Teaching staff in further education colleges in England, with a PGCE (for schools or FE) are as follows:

			Percentage
	1994–95	*1995–96*	*1996–97*
Full-time	17	18	19
Part-time	6	6	7

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list, for each of the last three years, the percentage of full-time and part-time teaching staff in *(a)* schools and *(b)* further education colleges with no teaching qualifications. [68754]

Ms Estelle Morris: Teachers in maintained nursery, primary, secondary and special schools, in England, who do not have Qualified Teacher Status are as follows:

			Percentage
	31 March 1995	*31 March 1996*	*31 March 1997* [1]
Full-time	1	1	1
Part-time	3	4	4

Teaching staff in further education colleges in England, without a teaching qualification[2] are as follows:

			Percentage
	1994–95	*1995–96*	*1996–97*
Full-time	9	9	9
Part-time	15	14	14

[1] 1997 data are provisional

[2] There is no equivalent to qualified teacher status for FE. The teaching qualifications include postgraduate certificate of education, degrees with qualified teacher status, certificates of education and other vocational teaching qualifications.

Employment Service

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many staff in the Employment Service have been employed for less than *(a)* three months, *(b)* six months, *(c)* one year and *(d)* two years. [68940]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Richard Foster to Mr. Terry Rooney, dated 2 February 1999:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has asked Leigh Lewis to reply direct to your question regarding the number of staff in the Employment Service who have been employed for less than (a) three months, (b) six months, (c) one year and (d) two years. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to Mr. Lewis as Chief Executive of the Agency. I am replying in his absence.

The information given in the table below is the latest available (as at 31 December 1998) and includes both permanent and temporary staff.

	Number
Total number of staff	35,994
of whom:	
employed less than three months	2,969
employed three but less than six months	1,948
employed six but less than 12 months	1,452
employed 12 but less than 24 months	2,639

I hope this is helpful.

HEALTH

Drugs Prescriptions

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what was the average proportion of non-generic drug prescriptions in 1997–98 in *(a)* prescribing practices and *(b)* dispensing practices; [68445]

(2) what were the average comparative costs of drugs per patient in 1997–98 in *(a)* prescribing practices and *(b)* dispensing practices; [68444]

(3) what was the cost to the NHS in 1997–98 of drugs *(a)* prescribed by doctors and *(b)* dispensed by doctors; [68442]

(4) what was the average cost of non-generic drugs in 1997–98 in *(a)* NHS hospitals, *(b)* pharmacies and *(c)* dispensing practices. [68449]

Mr. Denham: The available information is shown in the table.

Drugs prescribed in general practice[1] *in England and dispensed in the community, 1997–98* [2]

	Prescribing practices [3]	*Dispensing practices* [4]
Average net ingredient cost[5] per patient[6]	£78	£118
Average net ingredient cost per non generic item prescribed[7]	£11.42	£10.49
Percentage of prescribed items which were non generic[7]	34 per cent.	74 per cent.
Total net ingredient cost	£3,791 million	£387 million

[1] Information for items prescribed and dispensed in National Health Service hospitals is not available.

[2] The prescription information was obtained from the Prescribing Analyses and Cost (PACT) system and is based on a full analysis of all prescriptions written by general practitioners and Practice Nurses in England which are dispensed in England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Isle of Man. All figures exclude dressings and appliances.

[3] Drugs prescribed by prescribing practices which are dispensed by community pharmacists.

[4] Includes drugs prescribed by dispensing practices which are dispensed by community pharmacists.

[5] The net ingredient cost is the basic cost of a drug. This cost does not take account of discounts, dispensing costs, fees or prescription charge income.

[6] The number of patients is derived from patient lists and includes temporary patients. The patient list size is based on information submitted by practices to the Prescription Pricing Authority. List size as at March 1998 has been used. Figures for average net ingredient cost per patient have been rounded to the nearest £.

[7] In PACT, prescription items can be prescribed generically, and recorded as a generic, but dispensed and reimbursed as a proprietary because a generic does not exist. The percentage of non generic drugs prescribed in the reply does not include these items.

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what was the total NHS expenditure on drugs in 1997–98; [68441]

(2) what was the total *(a)* expenditure and *(b)* allocation for drugs in (i) the NHS and (ii) each health authority in 1997–98. [68451]

Mr. Denham: In 1997–98 total National Health Service expenditure on drugs was £5,195 million. Drugs prescribed by Family Health Services (FHS) practitioners account for £4,107 million of the total, and those prescribed by hospital and community health service (HCHS) providers account for £1,088 million.

The total allocation for FHS drugs (which includes an amount retained centrally) in 1997–98 was £4,123 million. The table shows health authority allocations and expenditure for FHS drugs.

HCHS allocations do not specify an amount for drugs. HCHS expenditure on drugs occurs mainly in NHS trusts and cannot be attributed accurately to health authorities.

FHS allocation and expenditure for drugs by health authority, 1997–98

£000

Health authority	*Allocation* [1]	*Expenditure* [2]
Avon	72,863	70,898
Barking and Havering	29,596	29,994
Barnet	24,611	25,517
Barnsley	21,800	22,365
Bedfordshire	42,072	42,582
Berkshire	56,145	56,871
Birmingham	85,921	86,071
Bradford	39,235	39,364
Brent and Harrow	35,012	35,757
Bromley	22,748	23,336
Buckinghamshire	47,904	47,633
Bury and Rochdale	33,583	34,711
Calderdale and Kirklees	49,029	50,171
Cambridge and Huntingdon	31,682	33,419
Camden and Islington	26,444	26,442
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	46,136	47,567
County Durham	55,412	54,583
Coventry	25,169	25,343
Croydon	23,416	23,270
Doncaster	29,608	29,991
Dorset	63,075	62,823
Dudley	24,667	25,402
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	50,425	50,817
East and North Hertfordshire	38,530	39,906
East Kent	53,012	55,032
East Lancashire	47,234	49,032
East London and City	46,236	47,351
East Norfolk	55,020	55,750
East Riding	48,568	50,232
East Surrey	32,672	33,132
East Sussex, Brighton and Hove	65,991	67,956
Enfield and Haringey	34,227	36,014
Gateshead and South Tyneside	32,304	31,649
Gloucestershire	44,565	46,448
Greenwich and Bexley	32,811	32,785
Herefordshire	12,745	12,686
Hillingdon	17,857	18,005
Isle of Wight	12,488	12,813
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	23,622	23,398
Kingston and Richmond	24,081	24,036
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	54,492	54,025
Leeds	62,028	63,887
Leicestershire	71,977	74,334
Lincolnshire	56,806	58,541
Liverpool	44,574	46,192
Manchester	42,076	44,669
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	44,988	45,307
Morecambe Bay	29,677	29,970
Newcastle and North Tyneside	40,889	40,223
North and East Devon	40,287	40,116
North and Mid Hampshire	37,452	38,289
North Cheshire	26,898	27,885
North Cumbria	26,605	27,238
North Derbyshire	30,722	30,189
North Essex	68,922	70,824
North Nottinghamshire	32,658	33,527
North Staffordshire	38,760	38,988
North West Anglia	33,275	34,352
North West Lancashire	44,073	44,947
North Yorkshire	57,949	57,756
Northamptonshire	45,322	46,049
Northumberland	27,498	27,582
Nottingham	47,582	48,419
Oxfordshire	41,685	41,368
Portsmouth and South-East Hampshire	42,524	43,609
Redbridge and Waltham Forest	32,678	32,945
Rotherham	21,119	21,978
Salford and Trafford	42,771	44,071
Sandwell	24,524	24,655
Sefton	26,508	26,933
Sheffield	43,836	43,605
Shropshire	35,403	36,900
Solihull	18,114	17,441
Somerset	39,109	39,251
South and West Devon	53,144	53,626
South Cheshire	57,370	59,522
Southern Derbyshire	46,086	46,406
South Essex	53,674	55,234
South Humber	27,403	27,784
South Lancashire	26,282	27,208
South Staffordshire	43,844	45,543
Southampton and South-West Hampshire	43,285	44,973
St. Helens and Knowsley	34,184	35,527
Stockport	26,145	27,170
Suffolk	55,761	58,078
Sunderland	27,077	27,036
Tees	50,773	51,773
Wakefield	27,863	27,968
Walsall	22,107	22,020
Warwickshire	41,751	42,416
West Hertfordshire	39,083	38,620
West Kent	77,214	78,451
West Pennine*	38,095	39,341
West Surrey	49,217	50,034
West Sussex	61,163	62,300
Wigan and Bolton	49,533	51,142
Wiltshire	44,693	45,921
Wirral	32,852	33,632
Wolverhampton	21,178	21,602
Worcestershire	40,426	40,921

Source:
[1] EL(96)107
[2] PPA PACT Data
Note:
Figures relate to presciptions dispensed in 1997–98, which were paid for in a different period (approx. June 1997 to May 1998)

Herbal Medicines

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to change the regulations on the sale and use of herbal medicines. [67854]

Ms Jowell: Ministers have asked the Medicines Control Agency, in the light of the expansion in the range of herbal remedies on the market in recent years, to consider whether there is a need to update the lists of specified potent or toxic herbs which are subject to restrictions on sale and supply. The lists of herbs, which are set out in the Schedule to the Medicines (Retail Sale

or Supply of Herbal Remedies) Order 1977, have not been reviewed since they were first established. If the Agency identifies a need to amend the lists, the proposals will be subject to public consultation.

Departmental Responsibilities

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what responsibilities which his Department had prior to the Comprehensive Spending Review are to be *(a)* discontinued by his Department, *(b)* transferred to another department, *(c)* transferred to an executive agency and *(d)* added to his Department over the period 1998–99 to 2001–02. [68406]

Mr. Denham: Following the comprehensive spending review, there are two areas where the Department will be transferring responsibility. First, support for local authorities which accommodate adult asylum seekers and asylum-seeking families will be funded through the Home Office. Secondly, the London rough sleepers Initiative which has to date been funded by the Department, will become the responsibility of the London rough sleepers unit, an agency which will report to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Departmental Legislation

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what additional legislation, not currently before Parliament, was assumed in the production of his Department's spending allocation for 1999–2000 to 2001–02 in the Comprehensive Spending Review. [68422]

Mr. Denham: There is a long-standing convention that legislative proposals for each year are not announced before the Queen's Speech at the start of the relevant Session.

PVC Toys

Mr. Salter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the recommendations of the European Commission's Scientific Committee on Toxicity, Ecotoxicity and the Environment in respect of harmful chemicals in soft PVC toys. [68916]

Dr. Howells: I have been asked to reply.

I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave him today to PQ number 68917, *Official Report*, column *623*.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Independent Adjudication Officers

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what level of qualifications and experience is required for those undertaking the role of independent adjudication officers in social security cases; what medical training or guidance they receive with regard to their duties; and if he will make a statement. [67370]

Angela Eagle: The administration of the Benefits Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Peter Mathison. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. David Hinchliffe, dated 2 February 1999:

I am replying to your recent Parliamentary Question asking what level of qualifications and experience is required for those undertaking the role of independent adjudication officers in social security cases, what medical training or guidance they receive with regard to their duties, and if he will make a statement.

The relevant experience of Benefits Agency staff appointed to be Adjudication Officers (AOs) is taken into account in deciding the level of duties undertaken. AOs considering Disability Living Allowance (DLA), Attendance Allowance claims and questions in relation to claims for Industrial Injury Disablement Benefits are of an executive grade. The minimum qualifications for direct entry into this grade are five 'O' levels/GCSEs and two A levels.

Prior to commencing their duties all AOs receive a full adjudication training programme as well as periodic refresher training as and when appropriate, for example when changes in legislation occur. In addition to training, both general and specific adjudication guidance is provided in the Adjudication Officer's Guide issued by Central Adjudication Services.

Non medical adjudication officers have access to Medical Services as a source of advice when considering adjudication decisions on claims to disability benefits including Incapacity Benefit (IB). This advice may take the form of specific advice on a particular query, or a full medical report following examination of the claimant. For the All Work Test on IB the medical report forms part of the evidence of AO uses in reaching their decision.

Guidance is also available to AOs dealing with DLA in the form of the Disability Handbook which provides information on the likely effects on a variety of medical conditions. The Handbook has been written by medical staff of the Department of Social Security with advice from the DLA Advisory Board and contributions from many organisations representing people with disabilities. Decisions on entitlement to DLA are not medical decisions although AOs may consult Medical Services doctors for advice when considering more complex cases. Medical services doctors, who are all experienced medical practitioners, receive special training for this role.

Some adjudication decisions, in claims for Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit and Severe Disablement Allowance, are made by Adjudicating Medical Authorities (AMAs). These individuals are fully qualified medical practitioners with wide experience of general medicine. In addition the AMA will undergo specific training to enable them to undertake this specialised form of assessment. The Chief Medical Advisor to the Department of Social Security formally appoints the AMA on successful completion of this training and the length of the appointment is dependent on the doctor maintaining the quality and professional standards laid down for them. In addition to their formal training AMAs are issued with Handbooks, for each of the above benefits, which acts as an aide memoire to the doctor and which cover all aspects of this work.

Under the Government's Decision Making and Appeals (DMA) provisions medical examinations will remain the same. However for IIDB and SDA instead of making a decision under DMA the AMA will instead offer advice in the form of a doctor's report. The Decision maker will be guided by the Doctor's Report in reaching their decision on any entitlement to benefit.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Benefits Overpayments

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how he intends to deal with the backlog of debt owed to the Benefits Agency due to overpayment of benefits; and if he will detail his plans for the write-off of old debts. [67758]

Angela Eagle: Administration of the Benefits Agency and recovery of overpayments is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency, Peter Mathison. He will write to my right hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Frank Field, dated 2 February 1999:

I am replying to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how we intend to deal with the backlog of debt owed to the Benefits Agency (BA) due to overpayment of benefits; and if I will detail our plans for the write-off of old debt.

We are determined to tackle the management of debt recovery in a structured, effective way. To support this, BA introduced a new debt strategy early in 1998.

An Accounts Receivable Controller (ARC) in April 98, with responsibility for the whole process of debt, including control, management, and recovery. As a result BA has a more co-ordinated and cohesive organisation to deal with debt issues.

A new Debt Accounting and Management system to account for and assist in the prompt identification and actioning of debt is also currently being developed. It will provide an automated, cost-effective capability to obtain control of debt, and improved Debt management information to enable detailed root cause analysis of debt. The result will be to minimise the causes of debt and maximise recoveries.

The number of overpayment cases awaiting calculation is now under control and is expected to fall to a number equivalent to one month's intake of work by March 1999. A package of administrative easements agreed with Treasury have played a significant part in assisting BA reduce stocks of arrears of outstanding overpayments whilst ensuring recovery was actively pursued where possible.

There is no longer a need to write-off old recoverable debts under the easements package, although debts may be written off under the criteria laid out in current instructions; these are

debts over £25 less than £100 abandoned 6 years after last effective recovery;

debts between £100 and £300, abandoned after 10 years;

debts over £300 abandoned after 20 years;

debts under £25

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Vaccine Damage Payments

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he expects to announce the outcome of the review of compensation for vaccine damaged children. [68239]

Mr. Bayley: Consideration is still being given to this complex and sensitive issue and an announcement will be made in due course.

Severely Disabled Children

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what factors underlie the postponement until April 2001 of the extension of the higher rate mobility component of the disability living allowance to three and four-year-old severely disabled children who have difficulties walking. [68698]

Mr. Bayley: The proposed extension will require legislation. If approved by Parliament, the new provision will come into operation at the same time as other benefit changes for disabled people are made as part of a co-ordinated package to help the most severely disabled people. These changes would help ensure that resources are better targeted at those who most need help.

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what financial assistance is available to severely disabled under-fives to enable them to attend playgroups and other pre-school provision. [68696]

Mr. Bayley: There is a wide range of financial assistance available which contributes towards the extra costs faced by families with severely disabled children under five. No attempt is made to specify how families should spend the benefits which include:

Within Income Support, income based Jobseeker's Allowance, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, groups identified as likely to have extra expenses receive help through the disability premium structure.

The new Disability Income Guarantee will provide extra help in these premiums for families with disabled children getting the highest rate of the care component of Disability Living Allowance.

We are also proposing to extend the higher rate mobility component of Disability Living Allowance (currently £35.85 a week) to severely disabled 3–4 year olds with a mobility problem.

In addition, some assistance may be available from the Local Authority.

London Organised Fraud Investigation Team

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the report produced by Cheryl Weaver into the London Organised Fraud Investigation Team. [68564]

Mr. Timms: None. Cheryl Weaver was attached to the London Organised Fraud Investigation Team as a temporary seconde to gain a personal understanding of its role and function.

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the current situation of the employees of the London Organised Fraud Investigation Team. [68565]

Mr. Timms: The current situation of employees of the London Organised Fraud Investigation Team (LOFIT) is a matter for the Association of London Government (ALG) as the body responsible for the management of LOFIT and for Westminster City Council as the formal employer of the staff.

Pensions (Minimum Income Guarantee)

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the number of pensioners who *(a)* will be eligible for the new pension income guarantee and *(b)* will claim the guarantee. [68821]

Mr. Timms: We estimate that around 1.5 million pensioners will be receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee at April 1999. Estimates of the numbers of pensioners who will be eligible for, but not claiming, the Minimum Income Guarantee, and estimates of the numbers who will make a claim are currently being revised following the discovery of an error in the published take-up estimates. We expect to be publishing revised estimates in the Spring.

Kenneth Gilbert

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the appeal by Kenneth Gilbert of Brixham in relation to his disability care allowance will be heard; and if he will ensure the hearing takes place before a disability appeals tribunal. [68798]

Angela Eagle: The administration of Disability Living Allowance is a matter for Peter Mathison, Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member with further details.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Anthony Steen, dated 2 February 1999:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking when the appeal by Kenneth Gilbert of Brixham in relation to his disability care allowance will be heard; and if he will ensure the hearing takes place before a disability appeals tribunal.

It may be helpful if I explain that there are 4 tiers to the Disability Living Allowance (DLA) adjudication process; new claim, first tier review, second tier review, and appeal to a Disability Appeal Tribunal.

Mr. Gilbert submitted a DLA claim on 21 February 1995 and was awarded the higher rate of the mobility component from and including 7 February 1995.

On 29 February 1996, Mr. Gilbert requested a review and asked for care needs to be considered. He was awarded the lowest rate of the care component from and including 1 March 1996. His entitlement to the mobility component was unaffected.

On 29 October 1998, Mr. Gilbert asked for a review of his entitlement to the care component. He completed a claim pack with details of his current care needs but on 9 December 1998 an adjudication officer (AO) was unable to find grounds to review the previous decision. The decision was notified to Mr. Gilbert on 23 December 1998 with details about his right of review within 3 months.

I should explain that if a review is requested more than 3 months after the previous decision was notified, the decision may only be reviewed if specific criteria are satisfied. For example, the previous decision must have been made in ignorance of a material fact, or based on a mistake as to a material fact, or there must have been a relevant change of circumstances.

On 13 January 1999, a request for an appeal to a Disability Appeal Tribunal against the decision dated 9 December 1998 was received from Mr. Gilbert. The team leader of the operational section responsible for Mr. Gilbert's claim telephoned him on 28 January and explained that the correct next stage in the adjudication process was a review and that this would include a full explanation of the reasons for the decision. Mr. Gilbert said he was happy about this and had merely been confused about the procedures when he requested an appeal. The team leader explained that if Mr. Gilbert was dissatisfied with the outcome of the review decision, he would then have the right to request an appeal to a Tribunal within 3 months of the notification date.

On 28 January a different AO considered all the evidence, including further clarification of his care needs given by Mr. Gilbert during his telephone conversation with the operational team leader. A review decision, upholding the previous decision, was completed on 28 January and was issued to Mr. Gilbert on 1 February 1999. The decision carries the right of appeal to a Disability Appeal Tribunal.

If Mr. Gilbert does request an appeal against the decision of 28 January, the Independent Tribunal Service (ITS) will be responsible for the administration of the appeal hearing and for inviting Mr. Gilbert to attend. The ITS is wholly independent of the Benefits Agency.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

BASIS Southern Command

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many arrests have been made each month by BASIS Southern Command since its establishment to date. [68930]

(2) how many of the investigating team of BASIS Southern Command were restricted to work in their office and unable to pursue investigations in the field from September 1998 to date; and if he will make a statement. [68931]

Mr. Timms: Questions on Benefit Agency operational matters are the responsibility of the Chief Executive, Peter Mathison. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Iain Duncan Smith, dated 2 February 1999:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to respond to your recent Parliamentary Questions asking, how many arrests have been made each month by Benefits Agency Security Investigation Service (BASIS) Southern Command since its establishment to date, and how many of the investigating team of BASIS Southern Command were restricted to work in their office and unable to pursue investigations in the field from September 1998 to date.

In the period April to December 1998 BASIS investigations resulted in 667 arrests. BASIS investigators do not have powers of arrest and therefore these arrests were effected by the police. Of these, 350 arrests related to investigations conducted by the Southern Unit teams and a monthly breakdown of these is shown on the attached table.

No BASIS team has been restricted to work in their office other than where this has been necessary to complete the detailed court preparation work following an intensive investigation.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Income Support

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the number of families with children in receipt of income support distinguishing between *(a)* one-parent and *(b)* two-parent families broken down by families with (i) one child, (ii) two children, (iii) three children and (iv) four or more children; and within each group if he will list the number of children aged (1) under 12 months, (2) one to two years, (3) three to four years, (4) five to 10 years, (5) 11 to 15 years and (6) 16 to 18 years. [67793]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Numbers of families with children receiving income support by family type, family size and age of each child as at August 1998

Thousand

	Number of:		*Number of children aged*					
	Families	*Children*	*Under 12 months*	*1 to 2 years*	*3 to 4 years*	*5 to 10 years*	*11 to 15 years*	*16 to 18 years*
All Families								
All Children	1,248	2,379	126	293	295	883	624	159
With 1 child	552	552	53	106	74	149	128	41
With 2 children	406	812	37	94	110	315	204	52
With 3 children	189	566	20	55	64	238	157	34
With 4 or more	101	450	16	39	47	182	135	32

Numbers of families with children receiving income support by family type, family size and age of each child as at August 1998

Thousand

	Number of:		Number of children aged					
	Families	*Children*	*Under 12 months*	*1 to 2 years*	*3 to 4 years*	*5 to 10 years*	*11 to 15 years*	*16 to 18 years*
Couples								
All Children	200	445	17	41	41	148	144	54
With 1 child	69	69	4	8	4	12	25	16
With 2 children	63	127	5	12	13	41	41	15
With 3 children	38	113	4	10	11	43	36	10
With 4 or more	30	137	4	11	14	53	43	13
Single Parents								
All Children	1,048	1,934	109	252	254	735	480	105
With 1 child	483	483	49	98	70	137	103	26
With 2 children	343	685	32	81	97	274	164	37
With 3 children	151	453	16	44	53	195	121	24
With 4 or more	71	313	11	28	33	129	92	19

Notes:
1. Numbers are rounded to the nearest thousand.
2. Figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample and as such are subject to a degree of sampling error.

Source:
Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry August 1998.

Family Credit

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the number of families with children in receipt of family credit distinguishing between one-parent and two-parent families between families with *(a)* one child, *(b)* two children, *(c)* three children and *(d)* four or more children and between children aged (i) under 12 months, (ii) one to two years, (iii) three to four years, (iv) five to 10 years, (v) 11 to 15 years and (vi) 16 to 18 years. [67794]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Number of families with children in receipt of family credit

Thousand

	Number of:		Number of children aged					
	Families	*Children*	*Under 12 months*	*1–2 years*	*3–4 years*	*5–10 years*	*11–15 years*	*16–18 years*
All families								
All children	782.5	1,576.9	74.3	169.4	178.1	587.6	450.8	116.7
With 1 child	296.7	296.7	23.4	48.8	33.9	81.9	78.2	30.5
With 2 children	278.2	556.3	24.9	57.9	66.8	207.2	158.5	41.0
With 3 children	136.0	408.1	15.2	36.8	45.2	169.2	117.2	24.6
With 4 or more	71.6	315.8	10.9	25.9	32.1	129.3	96.9	20.7
Couples								
All children	393.1	926.5	59.2	119.4	116.6	337.5	236.2	57.6
With 1 child	97.2	97.2	15.8	24.2	10.1	16.4	22.3	8.4
With 2 children	144.7	289.4	20.1	42.1	43.8	99.5	66.0	17.9
With 3 children	92.4	277.3	13.3	29.9	34.9	114.1	70.3	14.7
With 4 or more	58.7	262.6	10.0	23.2	27.7	107.5	77.5	16.6
Lone Parents								
All children	389.4	650.3	15.1	50.0	61.5	250.1	214.7	59.1
With 1 child	199.4	199.4	7.6	24.6	23.8	65.5	55.8	22.1
With 2 children	133.4	266.9	4.8	15.8	23.0	107.8	92.5	23.0
With 3 children	43.6	130.9	1.8	6.9	10.3	55.0	47.0	9.8
With 4 or more	12.9	53.2	9.0	2.7	4.3	21.8	19.4	4.1

Notes:
1. Numbers are rounded to the nearest hundred
2. Figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample and as such are subject to a degree of sampling error

Source:
Family Credit Statistics Quarterly Enquiry August 1998

TREASURY

Local Authority Capital Receipts

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list his latest estimates and forecast expenditure in cash terms for the capital receipts initiative for (i) 1997–98, (ii) 1998–99, (iii) 1999–2000, (iv) 2000–01 and (v) 2001–02. [68384]

Dr. Reid: I have been asked to reply.

The following capital allocations have been made to local authorities in England under the capital receipts initiative:

	£
1997–98	174,270,000
1998–99	569,359,000
1999–2000	570,169,000

The total resources for housing capital allocations in 2000–01 and 2001–02, which show substantial increases on the 1999–2000 figure and deliver the remainder of the additional £5 billion for investment in housing that we are making available during the current Parliament, were announced last summer following the Comprehensive Spending Review. Decisions have yet to be made about the distribution of these resources between different programmes. We have recently consulted on a proposal to combine capital receipts initiative and other housing capital support (apart from that for disabled facilities grants) into a single funding regime from 2000–01 onwards. The outcome of this consultation exercise will be announced shortly.

Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative

Mr. Healey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what action the Government are taking to speed up the implementation of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative. [67520]

Ms Hewitt: At the Annual Meetings of the IMF and World Bank in October 1998 the Chancellor secured agreement on his proposals for a comprehensive review of the HIPC initiative in 1999, and is currently pressing for the review to address, among other things, the timing of debt relief given under the initiative.

The decision was also taken to allow IMF post conflict assistance programmes to count towards a country's track record under the HIPC initiative. This could bring decision points (and therefore debt relief) forward by up to twelve months for certain countries such as Rwanda.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the progress of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative. [67513]

Ms Hewitt: 31 out of 40 countries originally identified by the IMF/World Bank as being eligible for inclusion into the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative have begun the process of securing a sustainable exit to their debt burden. Two countries have reached the end of the process. A further seven countries have reached Decision Point.

The IMF/World Bank are to carry out a comprehensive review of the HIPC initiative this year.

Pension Investment

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he proposes to publish the consultation document on pension investment mentioned in the Pensions Green Paper (Cm. 4179). [69527]

Mr. Milburn: The Government have today published a consultation document, "Helping to deliver stakeholder pensions: flexibility in pension investment". Copies are available in the Vote Office and in the Library of the House. This takes forward the remit in the Green Paper "A new contract for welfare: partnership in pension", Cm 4179, chapter 7, paragraph 39. This contribution to the Government's pension reform strategy opens up potential for greater transparency in the pensions market which should in turn improve labour market flexibility and contribute to the strategy for improving productivity discussed in the Pre Budget Report, Cm 4076.

The financial instrument proposed in the document will be suitable for any kind of defined contribution pension: personal, occupational and, in time, stakeholder. It is not a pension in its own right. It will hold units in pooled investment schemes, making it possible for scheme members to move easily and at low cost between different kinds of pension, for example on a change of employment or a move into self employment.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Iraq

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the number of Scud missiles held by Iraq. [68750]

Mr. George Robertson: I have been asked to reply.

The UN Special Commission on Iraq believes it has accounted for all but two of Iraq's 819 Soviet origin SCUDs and all declared launch vehicles. However, owing to the indigenous production of components and uncertainties attending the verification of the destruction of complete missiles, it is possible that Iraq has concealed a small number of 650km range SCUD type missiles. It is also possible that components were removed from missiles that were unilaterally destroyed.

Turkey (Death Penalty)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make representations via the British Embassy in Ankara to the Turkish Government to request that the death penalty will not be used against the suspect accused of murdering Edgar Fernandes. [68169]

Mr. Fatchett: It is for the Maltese Government to make representations to the Turkish Government to request the death penalty is not used against the suspect. The UK, along with our EU partners, opposes the use of the death penalty, and calls upon all States to abolish it.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the meeting between Baroness Symons and the Turkish Ambassador on 7 January 1999 in respect of the Edgar Fernandes case; what was the result of that meeting; and what action his Department has taken since then. [68170]

Mr. Fatchett: My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State had a private meeting with the Turkish Ambassador on 7 January 1999 at which they discussed a variety of bilateral issues. Our staff in Ankara and Valletta remain in touch with the Turkish and Maltese Governments respectively about the extradition of Mr. Mohammed Abdul Monem Abbas Aly.

Entertainment Budgets

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the entertainment budgets for each of his Department's posts abroad in the last financial year. [68171]

Mr. Fatchett: Overseas posts' budgets, including entertainment budgets, are devolved to each post. No central record is kept of detailed budget allocations for each post, and they could only be provided at excessive cost. However, central records are kept of posts expenditure, and the figures for 1997–98 are set out below.

Post	*Spend 1997–98*
Abidjan	12,575
Abu Dhabi	30,398
Abuja	5,920
Accra	24,015
Addis Ababa	16,239
Alexandria	9,845
Algiers	5,972
Almaty	9,917
Amman	38,907
Amsterdam	13,655
Anguilla	11,187
Ankara	33,882
Antananarivo	2,375
Ashgabat	15,311
Asuncion	5,726
Athens	73,370
Atlanta	56,803
Auckland	31,784
Aus Africa: Rmo	[1]135
Bahrain	13,249
Baku	2,704
Bandar Seri Begawan	15,475
Bangkok	59,262
Banjul	5,354
Barcelona (Inc. Andorra)	24,902
Beirut	16,285
Belgrade	35,446
Belmopan	6,536
Berlin	77,693
Berne	70,812
Bilbao	3,706
Bogota (Inc. Medellin)	15,947
Bombay	30,388
Bonn	132,293
Bordeaux	28,988
Boston	43,673
Brasilia	49,634
Bratislava	12,336
Bridgetown	45,025
Brisbane	39,013
Brussels	[2]394,845
Brussels Jmo	408
Bucharest	19,988
Budapest	35,710
Buenos Aires	78,205
Cairo	69,343
Calcutta	13,637
Canberra	59,207
Cape Town	15,418
Caracas	28,265
Casablanca	15,040
Castries	11,551
Chicago	41,899
Cleveland	14,792
Colombo (Inc. Maldives)	26,599
Conakry (Bhc Freetown)	246
Copenhagen (Inc. Torshavn)	37,389
Dakar (Inc. Conakry)	15,422
Damascus	19,916
Dar Es Salaam	18,810
Dhaka	26,918
Doha	21,844
Dubai	67,820
Dublin	40,379
Durban	5,512
Dusseldorf	19,213
Ekaterinburg	15,849
Frankfurt	33,477
Freetown	3,238
Gaborone	5,162
Geneva Cg	[3]218,055
Georgetown	8,598
Gibraltar	41,087
Grand Cayman	1,589
Grand Turk	4,866
Guangzhou	17,204
Guatemala City	8,097
Hamburg	54,777
Hanoi	22,445
Harare	22,839
Havana	27,426
Helsinki	48,769
Ho Chi Minh City	25,380
Hong Kong Btc	90,105
Honiara	342
Houston	65,068
Islamabad	59,998
Istanbul	33,140
Jakarta	65,308
Jedda	67,547
Jerusalem	12,557
Johannesburg	36,787
Kabul	146
Kampala	18,387
Karachi	14,475
Kathmandu	10,228
Khartoum	13,224
Kiev	24,655
Kigali	4,380
Kingston	24,732
Kingstown	7,491
Kinshasa	9,222
Kuala Lumpur	69,053
Kuwait	28,793
La Paz	9,967
Lagos (Inc. Cotonou)	48,987
Lille	28,710
Lilongwe (Inc. Blantyre)	14,526
Lima	31,047
Lisbon	74,361
Ljubljana	13,462
Los Angeles	24,369
Luanda	20,448
Lusaka	24,986
Luxembourg	15,170
Lyon	38,213
Madras	16,691
Madrid	130,255
Managua	13,432
Manila	28,010
Maputo	9,953
Marseilles	37,093
Maseru	3,987
Mbabane	4,766
Melbourne	50,336
Mexico City	44,683
Milan	31,621
Minsk	4,459
Montevideo	13,920
Montreal	36,387
Moscow	151,364
Munich	44,061

Post	Spend 1997–98
Muscat	42,543
Nairobi	43,896
Naples	23,650
Nassau	11,063
New Delhi	155,005
New York Cg	[4]259,174
Nicosia	76,269
Nuku'Alofa	1,168
Osaka	121,138
Oslo	42,416
Ottawa	60,570
Palma	10,904
Panama City	9,903
Peking	83,780
Perth	33,026
Phnom Penh	4,972
Plymouth	4,542
Port Louis	9,217
Port Moresby	7,960
Port of Spain	12,781
Prague	34,363
Pretoria	35,716
Quito	8,886
Rabat	13,378
Rangoon	7,394
Reykjavik	9,096
Riga	14,705
Rio De Janeiro	19,386
Riyadh	84,815
Rome	100,644
San Francisco	67,800
San Jose	3,779
San Salvador	10,383
Sana'A	32,949
Santiago	57,206
Santo Domingo	3,492
Sao Paulo	81,278
Sarajevo	19,218
Seattle	16,709
Seoul	95,443
Shanghai	32,469
Singapore	55,607
Skopje	3,498
Sofia	14,788
St. George's	7,920
St. John's	14,618
St. Petersburg	35,726
Stanley	3,500
Stockholm	34,201
Strasbourg-Council of Europe	14,810
Suva	15,488
Sydney	95,523
Taipei Btco	32,416
Tallinn	2,411
Tashkent	8,321
Tbilisi	12,330
Tegucigalpa	4,057
Tehran	12,629
Tel Aviv	47,444
The Hague	73,533
Tirana	2,962
Tokyo	670,142
Toronto	42,038
Tortola	6,629
Tripoli	9,469
Tunis	13,131
Ulaanbaatar	7,099
Valletta	13,837
Vancouver	36,718
Victoria	6,025
Vienna	87,978
Vila	8,211
Vilnius	8,843
Warsaw	69,614
Washington	254,762
Wellington	49,362
Windhoek	8,143
Yaounde	9,969
Yerevan	4,864
Zagreb	14,533
Zurich	11,918
Total	8,271,861

[1] Charge for entertainment at an overseas post (signed off by NAO)
[2] Includes UKMIS and UKREP
[3] Including UKMIS and IKDIS Geneva
[4] Including UKMIS and BIS New York

Missing Arms Consignment (South Africa)

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the South African authorities concerning a cargo of military equipment flown from RAF Manston in May 1998 destined for South Africa which failed to arrive; and if he will make a statement. [68235]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Neither I nor others in the Foreign Office have had discussions with the South African authorities on this matter. Customs and Excise, who are responsible for investigating breaches of export control restrictions, are aware of these allegations.

Cyprus

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) when an official from the British High Commission last visited the town of Famagusta; and if he will make a statement; [68310]

(2) what recent discussions he has held and with whom, on the possibility of the return of the town of Famagusta to the Republic of Cyprus; and if he will make a statement. [68309]

Ms Quin: We remain active in support of UN efforts in search of a political settlement in Cyprus. The details of any settlement would have to have the agreement of both communities. The question of Varosha/Famagusta would be included in that.

Members of the High Commission in Nicosia visit Famagusta from time to time as part of their contacts with the Turkish Cypriot Community.

East Timor

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will provide details of the end-use monitoring undertaken by his Department into the use of Alvis armoured vehicles in Indonesia and East Timor since 1988. [68789]

Mr. Fatchett: No formal mechanisms exist at present for monitoring the end use that has been made of British defence equipment once it has been exported.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement regarding the deployment of British Saladin and Saracen armoured vehicles in East Timor by the Indonesian security forces since 1988. [68788]

Mr. Fatchett: Saladin and Saracen armoured vehicles were exported to Indonesia in the 1960s. No formal mechanisms exist for monitoring the use of British defence equipment once it has been exported. We have made clear to the Indonesian authorities that British supplied equipment should not be used against civilians to prevent the exercise of their rights of free expression, assembly and association, or in violation of other international human rights standards.

NATO Enlargement

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what modifications to the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty will be required following the accession of new NATO member states. [68740]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: No amendments to the CFE Treaty are required before the accession of new members to NATO. But our aim is that the process of adapting the Treaty, under way since 1996, will result in an agreement which better reflects the realities of today's European security environment, by moving the Treaty from a structure based on the Cold War military alliances to one based on national limits.

Arms Exports

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to change the criteria for applications for licences for the export of conventional arms; and if he will make a statement, with specific reference to his procedure for consultation. [68928]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: There are no plans to make any substantive changes to the criteria. The Government are considering, however, whether it would be necessary or desirable to consolidate the arms export licensing criteria announced on 28 July 1997, *Official Report*, columns *26–29*, and those in the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports.

Diplomatic Posts (Eastern Mediterranean)

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) how many personnel currently employed at the British High Commission in Nicosia have previously worked at the British Embassy in *(a)* Ankara and *(b)* Athens; and if he will make a statement on the inter-change of staff between the High Commission in Nicosia and the embassy at (i) Ankara and (ii) Athens; [68959]

(2) if he will make a statement on proposed changes in personnel employed at the British High Commission in Cyprus; and to which embassies or high commissions the existing personnel are being transferred; [68961]

(3) how many persons are employed at the United Kingdom High Commission office in Nicosia; how many of these are *(a)* Greek Cypriots and *(b)* Turkish Cypriots; and if he will make a statement. [68960]

Ms Quin: There are 25 UK based staff at the British High Commission in Nicosia. Two speak fluent Greek, one speaks fluent Turkish. One has served previously in Athens; another has served in Ankara. Of those leaving this year most will return to London; one will transfer to Athens.

Including part-time employees, there are 39 locally-engaged staff (the majority Greek Cypriot) in the High Commission office in Nicosia and 12 staff (the majority Turkish Cypriot) at separate premises in north Nicosia.

International Terrorism

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list those countries which his Department considers to sponsor terrorism. [68744]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We do not have a list of countries which sponsor terrorism. This Government condemn state sponsorship of terrorism and monitors closely any evidence of such activities. Where there is evidence, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office makes the governments in question aware of our concerns as and when they arise.

Salman Rushdie

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list those organisations which have maintained their fatwa on Salman Rushdie. [68748]

Mr. Fatchett: The fatwa against Salman Rushdie was decreed by the late Ayatollah Khomenei, not by any organisation or group of organisations. Ayatollah Khomenei died in 1989. A number of groups, Iranian and non-Iranian, have made statements about the fatwa over the years; many of them are of obscure status. The Iranian government have made clear their position, that they have no intention of taking any action against Salman Rushdie, nor will they encourage or assist anybody else to do so. We welcome these assurances.

Middle East

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what efforts he has made to ensure transparency in the use of EU aid to the Palestinian Authority. [68714]

Clare Short: I have been asked to reply.

We, other EU member states and the European Commission, continue to press the Palestinian Authority to consolidate its accounts and manage its finances in a transparent and accountable manner. We welcome the recent production of a five year Development Plan by the Palestinian Authority and the availability of more information on their budgetary process.

The EC only rarely provides direct financial assistance to the PA. Where it does so, special mechanisms are set up to ensure that the funds are properly spent.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of EU aid to the Palestinian Authority; and if he will place a copy of the reports on the effectiveness of the aid in the Library. [68713]

Clare Short: I have been asked to reply.

The European Union, including individual member states, has made a major contribution to supporting the Middle East Peace Process by providing 54 per cent. ($1.7 billion) of total development assistance to the Palestinians since 1993. This includes over 650 mecu provided directly by the European Commission to the Palestinian Authority.

To enable member states to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of EC aid, we have pressed for an evaluation of the EC's last five-year programme of assistance for the Palestinians, which ended in December 1998. We understand that this evaluation is soon to be finalised, and expect the findings to be formally presented by the Commission shortly. As soon as they are available, we will place a copy in the Library.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of progress made by the Palestinian Authority in combating terrorism. [68711]

Mr. Fatchett: We commend Palestinian efforts to clamp down on terrorism and their compliance so far with the security commitments signed up to in the Wye River Memorandum. Measures taken by the Palestinian Authority include the arrest of terrorist suspects, collection of illegal weapons, anti-incitement laws and provision of security plans to the Israelis. Meetings of the bilateral and trilateral committees on security issues continue to take place. We are glad to be able to assist the Palestinians in their efforts through major EU programmes of counter-terrorism assistance and security assistance. But there is still room for improvement and we urge continued co-operation between the parties to implement Wye.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Iranian Government not to provide support to organisations whose objectives are to destabilise the Chairman of the Palestinian Authority. [68767]

Mr. Fatchett: During the EU/Iran talks of 18 December 1998 in Vienna, we and our EU partners discussed the Middle East peace process with the Iranian representatives. We urged them not to obstruct the peace process. The Iranians said that they were not against peace, but it must be a just and justifiable peace. Iran welcomed the continued EU involvement in the Middle East peace process. We and our EU partners will continue to raise this issue with our Iranian interlocutors.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the percentage of Palestinians in *(a)* the West Bank and *(b)* Gaza living under the governance of the Palestinian Authority. [68765]

Mr. Fatchett: We assess that approximately 97.5 per cent. of Palestinians in the West Bank, and 100 per cent. in Gaza, live under the governance of the Palestinian Authority.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of progress towards democracy in areas under the control of the Palestinian Authority. [68751]

Mr. Fatchett: Since its establishment in May 1994 the Palestinian Authority has taken its first steps towards democracy and in January 1996 held free elections. The elections led to the establishment of the Palestinian Legislative Council. We continue to support the process of institution-building in the Palestinian Authority both bilaterally and through EU programmes.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on relations with Syria. [68747]

Mr. Fatchett: Our relations with Syria are good. I visited Syria in December 1998 and met President Asad and Foreign Minister Shara'a, and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I have been glad to receive Mr. Shara'a here on his visit to London today.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the preconditions placed on the normalisation of relations with Syria following Lockerbie, indicating which preconditions have been met and which have yet to be met. [68768]

Mr. Fatchett: There has at no stage been any consideration of attaching such conditions on the positive development of our relations with Syria.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he next expects to meet the Foreign Minister of Syria. [68746]

Mr. Fatchett: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and I will meet the Foreign Minister of Syria today during his visit to London.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the number of Syrian troops in Lebanon. [68749]

Mr. Fatchett: We believe that under the terms of the Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Co-ordination signed by the Lebanese and Syrian Governments in May 1991, there are approximately 22,000 Syrian troops in Lebanon.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the *(a)* financial, *(b)* military and *(c)* strategic assistance given by Iran to (i) Hamas and (ii) Hezbollah. [68742]

Mr. Fatchett: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) on 1 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *158*.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans *(a)* he and *(b)* ministers in his Department have to visit Israel. [68766]

Mr. Fatchett: Neither I nor my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has any plans to visit Israel at the present time.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representation he has made to the Palestinian Authority about the early release of Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, leader of Hamas. [68712]

Mr. Fatchett: We have not made any representations to the Palestinian Authority about the release of Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, leader of Hamas.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received about Iranian efforts to procure weapons of mass destruction. [68717]

Mr. Fatchett: We continue to encourage Iran to respect all the international treaties it has signed relating to nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, and to comply fully with its obligations under them.

With our European partners, we have urged Iran to negotiate an additional safeguards protocol with the IAEA which would significantly enhance the organisation's ability to detect activities not permitted under the NPT.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the acquisition of long-range ballistic missiles by Iran; and if he will make a statement concerning their effect on the stability of the Middle East. [68716]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We remain extremely concerned by Iran's flight test of its Shahab-3 ballistic missile in July of last year. The acquisition of this system, with an approximate range of 1300km, threatens the stability of the whole of the Middle East. We assess that though the Shahab-3 is at a relatively advanced stage of its development, Iran will not be able to deploy the system in the immediate future. Whilst we understand Iran's legitimate security concerns, we have repeatedly urged the Iranian authorities to refrain from developing ballistic missiles. It is in nobody's interest for an arms race to develop in this already volatile region.

The UK, as a founder member of the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), works with its partners to halt the proliferation of ballistic missile programmes of concern. The MTCR has done much to deny, among others, the Iranian ballistic missile programme, key technologies and equipment.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he has taken to ascertain the whereabouts of Israeli airman Ron Arad. [68745]

Mr. Fatchett: I take every opportunity to raise the issue of Ron Arad with anyone who may be able to provide information on his whereabouts. We also raise the cases of other missing servicemen.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he has taken to monitor Palestinian compliance with the agreement entered into at the Wye River Plantation. [68710]

Mr. Fatchett: We are in close contact with both sides and also with the US which plays a key role in monitoring compliance with the Wye Memorandum. Our Missions in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem also carefully monitor the level of compliance on the ground. Both the US and the Israelis declared themselves satisfied with Palestinian compliance with their commitments under Wye prior to the first redeployment on 20 November. Since then we continue to believe the Palestinians have made good progress.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make Iranian recognition of Israel a precondition for the restoration of ambassadorial links with Iran. [68743]

Mr. Fatchett: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and the Iranian Foreign Minister, as part of the New York agreement on 24 September 1998, agreed to exchange Ambassadors. We remain committed to all elements of that agreement.

Sudan (Religious Freedom)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations his Department has made to the Government of Sudan regarding the rights of Christians to religious freedom, over the last 18 months. [68639]

Mr. Fatchett: FCO officials have regularly raised these important issues with the Government of Sudan and will continue to do so.

Pakistan (Christian Community)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations his Department has made to the Government of Pakistan regarding the application of Sharia Law and its impact upon the Christian minority. [68640]

Mr. Fatchett: We continue to ensure that the Pakistan authorities remain aware of our concerns on human rights and religious minorities. We are following closely the progress of the Shariah Bill which has yet to pass Pakistan's Senate. We are aware of the concerns expressed by minorities and human rights groups about the possible effects of the Bill.

Kosovo

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what independent international investigation was conducted into the killings in Kosovo at Gornje Obrinje and what were the results; and if an investigation into killings at Racak has been commenced. [68804]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: An EU forensic team from Finland was admitted to Kosovo in December last year to conduct examinations of Gornje Obrinje and other massacre sites. They have not yet been able to complete their work at Gornje Obrinje but hope to do so in the spring. The same team have been conducting autopsies on those killed at Racak and will report to the FRY authorities, the OSCE and the EU when their examinations are complete.

My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has encouraged the Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in her continuing efforts to investigate these and other incidents and to bring those responsible to justice.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the legal basis for the possible use of military force in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. [68759]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The legal basis for any military action against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia would need to be considered in the light of the circumstances at the time. Any military action by British forces would have to be lawful under international law.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Slaughterhouse Inspections (Assaults)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many of his *(a)* Department's and *(b)* Agencies officials have been assaulted in the course of slaughterhouse inspections in each of the last five years; how many prosecutions followed the assaults; and what action his Department is taking to minimise the number of assaults. [63379]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 15 January 1999]:* The number of Departmental, mainly State Veterinary Service officials who have been subjected to intimidation at slaughterhouses is as follows:

1993–94: 0
1994–95: 7
1995–96: 0
1996–97: 1
1997–98: 0.

No prosecutions followed these incidents.

The Meat Hygiene Service (MHS), which was established on 1 April 1995, does not have information available on a year by year basis.

However, in response to evidence that MHS operational staff were being subjected to violence and/or intimidation, a survey was sent out to all 1,540 MHS operational staff in January 1998. It sought information on all incidents which inspectors had been involved with throughout their entire careers, not just since the launch of the MHS.

759 responses were received. 1 in 4 operational staff indicated that they had been subject to some form of violence and/or intimidation at some point. However, the most common instances related to verbal abuse/threats and not physical assault or obstruction. 17 MHS staff had been subjected to physical assault at some point.

Reported cases of physical assault are investigated with a view to prosecution under the Criminal Justice Act 1988. Obstruction of MHS staff in the performance of their duties is an offence under the Food Safety Act 1990. All reported cases are thoroughly investigated by MAFF Investigations Officers and prosecutions taken where it can be shown that MHS staff have been hampered from carrying out their meat inspection duties.

To date, 5 successful prosecutions have been taken.

British Retail Consortium

Mr. Hayes: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he last met representatives of the British Retail Consortium; and if he will make a statement. [67773]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* The Minister last met with the British Retail Consortium on 3 November 1998. At this meeting, the major retailers gave important assurances about the pigmeat they sell, not least that all their own label fresh pork, ham sausages and pork pies will come from stall and tether and MBM free production systems. They also gave an undertaking not to market as British, processed products produced from imported meat.

More generally, the retailers are making efforts to ensure that their sourcing practices meet or exceed consumer expectations in areas such as quality, traceability and local supply, and concern for animal welfare and the environment.

Mink Farming

Mr. Heppell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food at how many mink factory farms the killing of mink was witnessed by Ministry officials over the past three months; how long officials were in attendance at each mink factory farm; and what methods were used to carry out the killing, broken down by county in each case. [68148]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 27 January 1999]:* All licensed mink farms were inspected during the killing period. The actual killing operation was observed on six farms in Cornwall, Dorset, Hampshire, Northumberland, Lancashire and Yorkshire. The following killing methods were used: carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide and pentabarbitone injection.

Background Note

Welfare inspections of fur farms (in practice licensed mink farms) are made twice a year, once at the time of killing (November). Although the actual killing operation will not be observed in all cases, the veterinary officer carrying out the inspection is charged with ensuring that those responsible are aware of, and follow the requirements of, the welfare legislation. No central records are kept of the duration of visits but at a minimum they would take at least an hour.

Mr. Heppell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many mink and fox fur factory farms there are by county in England and Wales. [68146]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 27 January 1999]:* There are currently the following number of mink farms in England:

County	*Number of licensed mink farms*
Cornwall	1
Dorset	1
Hampshire	1
Isle of Wight	1
Lancashire	5
Northumberland	1
South Yorkshire	1
Staffordshire	1
West Yorkshire	1
Total	13

There are no licensed mink farms in Wales.

There is no requirement to register fox fur farms. However, I am not aware of any in England or Wales.

Non-modified Organisms

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will require food manufacturers who support the use of non-modified organisms to make

public the systems they use to ensure that their commitments to non-modified organisms can be verified. [68620]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 1 February 1999]:* EC Regulation 1139/98, which establishes the legal requirements for labelling foods containing GM soya and maize, and sets a precedent for the labelling of all GM foods, recognises that any food labelled as not containing GM soya or maize must be verifiable by scientific or other means. Enforcement of this requirement is a matter for Local Authorities.

Levy Scheme

Mr. Chope: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions were held with the major supermarkets about the principle of a flat rate levy for the Food Standards Agency before publication of the consultation paper, "Proposals for a Levy Scheme". [68973]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 2 February 1999]:* No such discussions were held.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is his estimate of the total cost of the proposed levy to fund the Food Standards Agency on *(a)* the charitable, *(b)* the voluntary and *(c)* other not-for-profit sectors. [68974]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 2 February 1999]:* The data are not available to make estimates of the number of food premises falling in these categories. The purpose of the public consultation exercise is to invite views on the proposals, including those from the sectors affected.

Genetically Modified Crops

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what provisions *(a)* exist and *(b)* are planned to require companies producing animal feeds to label products as containing ingredients produced as a result of genetic modification. [68773]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 2 February 1999]:* Current EU and UK legislation on animal feeding stuffs does not require the presence of genetically modified material to be labelled. It is anticipated that this issue will be addressed by a proposed regulation which the Commission is expected to submit formally to Council later this year.

Labelling of genetically modified (GM) animal feed

Background Note

Viable GM feed materials—ie., those capable of replication—are regulated under Council Directive 90/220 on the Deliberate Release of GMOs. Following a 1997 amendment to this Directive, any *viable* GM materials subsequently issued with a marketing consent are required to be labelled, although these provisions are non-specific. Because this amendment was not retrospective, the Monsanto soya and Ciba-Geigy (now Novartis) maize already authorised are not subject to these requirements for feed use. However, this is largely academic, as the vast majority of feed materials are processed by-products (ie., *non-viable*).

There is at present no product legislation regulating the authorisation of non-viable animal feed materials. These are likely to be covered in a forthcoming Commission proposal for a Council Regulation on Novel Feeds, which we expect to be formally submitted to Council later this year. This will to some extent parallel the existing Novel Foods Regulation, and regulate not only GM materials but also other novel feeds. We anticipate that the proposed labelling requirements will be consistent with the Commission's global approach (ie., does contain/does not contain).

In the absence of crop segregation and comprehensive legislative requirements, it is not possible to know the extent to which GM material is being used in animal feed in the UK. However, given the widespread use of materials derived from soya and maize, the probability is that some is present, although most likely in processed form (eg., maize gluten feed). Moreover, there could also be by-products from GM crops, such as cotton seed, which have been grown in the USA but for which marketing consent has not been sought in Europe under 90.220.

With regard to the effects of processing on GM material, it is known that this disrupts DNA. In the case of the Ciba-Geigy (now Novartis) maize, tests were conducted on maize gluten feed which indicated that the antibiotic resistance gene plus its replicator could not have survived processing. Further work on the effects of processing for a number of crops is being undertaken.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will place in the Library the results of the Government-commissioned toxicology tests carried out on Monsanto's genetically modified *(a)* cotton and *(b)* corn crops. [68775]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 2 February 1999]:* The Government do not commission research into an individual company's crops but can require additional work to be undertaken by all companies themselves when this is considered to be necessary. All toxicology data submitted for safety evaluation is required to have been produced to Good Laboratory Practice (GLP) standards. Under GLP, all studies must follow written standard procedures and all laboratory records and samples must be archived. All UK GLP certified laboratories are subject to independent inspections by Department of Health inspectors in accordance with EC requirements. Laboratories in the USA are subject to GLP inspections by the US authorities.

All data considered by the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment, except that considered to be commercially sensitive, are published on the DETR Public Register. In addition, the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes strongly encourages companies seeking food safety assessment to deposit a copy of their submissions with the British Library.

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to ensure that consumers can purchase animal produce which does not originate from animals fed genetically modified feed. [68777]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 2 February 1999]:* All genetically modified (GM) animal feed is rigorously assessed to ensure that the safety of consumers is not compromised by its use. However the Government recognise the desire of some consumers to be able to purchase products that have not been produced in this way. We therefore welcome the EC Commissions intention to draft a regulation on the labelling of GM Feed which will enable this wish to be satisfied. This is expected to be presented to the Council for agreement later this year. In the meantime, organic food producers and some others are already offering products which meet the needs of consumers who do not wish to purchase food produced using this feed.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 4 February 1999

CABINET OFFICE

Equal Opportunities

Mr. Miller: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will make a statement on the progress that has been made towards equality of opportunity in the Civil Service. [69526]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: I am publishing today a statistical report on equal opportunities in the Civil Service: "Equal Opportunities in the Civil Service Data Summary 1998". Copies of the report have been placed in the Libraries of the House and will be made available on the internet.

The report shows a continuing improvement in the proportion of people from those groups which are currently under-represented in most Civil Service management grades: women, ethnic minority staff and staff with disabilities. For example, the proportion of women at Higher Executive Officer level and above has risen to 26% in 1998 from 11% in 1984. In the Senior Civil Service, women now represent 18% of staff. The representation of ethnic minority staff at the first management level (Executive Officer) has increased to 5.1% from 2.9% in 1989. The overall proportion of staff with disabilities has increased to 4% from 3.8% in 1997.

Progress has been made but much remains to be done before the Service, at all levels, reflects society.

Later today, Sir Richard Wilson, the Head of the Home Civil Service and I plan to launch a Charter for action to redress the under-representation of ethnic minorities in the Senior Civil Service agreed with the Civil Service trades unions. The Charter has been endorsed by all Civil Service Heads of Department.

I am personally committed to a fair Civil Service in which diversity and equality of opportunity are valued. I aim to ensure that equal opportunities issues generally receive a high profile.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

UK Sports Institute

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many sports have formally undertaken to participate in the United Kingdom Sports Institute. [68113]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 28 January 1999]:* The United Kingdom Sports Institute will offer a network of first class services and facilities to a range of Olympic and other non-commercial sports. Major spectator sports will also be able to tap into the top quality sports science, medicine, nutrition and coaching expertise available.

The Sports Councils and Phoenix Sports Limited (the company established by the Sheffield Consortium) have been obtaining the views of Athletics, Netball, Squash, Swimming, Table Tennis and Triathlon to confirm exactly what their requirements are at the site in Sheffield. In addition to this, my hon. Friend the Minister for Sport has written seeking confirmation that they are happy with current proposals.

In parallel, the Home Country Sports Councils have been developing the proposed network centres throughout the country. Proposals for Scotland have already been made public. In England, the English Sports Council has been consulting widely with the governing bodies of sport over the past six months. This has included discussion with the newly appointed Performance Directors who have brought their own views on the most appropriate high performance structure for their sport. They are best placed to tell us what their sport needs and it is only sensible that we listen to what they have to say. I plan to make a more comprehensive announcement soon.

Osborne House

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what are his plans for the King Edward VII Convalescent Home for Officers at Osborne House on the Isle of Wight. [69804]

Mr. Alan Howarth: After very careful consideration, my right hon. Friend has decided that it is no longer appropriate to run part of Osborne House as a convalescent and residential home for the benefit of members of the Armed Forces and Civil Service. My right hon. Friend will be seeking, therefore, Parliament's approval to repeal the provisions of the Osborne Estate Act 1902 which places this responsibility on him. In the meantime, the home will remain open. The demand for residential and convalescent facilities has declined. The current costs to the taxpayer of running the home are around £500,000 each year, net of income. English Heritage meets additional costs for the care of the fabric of the building.

Our immediate concern is the care of the current residents of the home. I am grateful to the Civil Service Benevolent Fund, who run the home on our behalf, for offering to work closely with my Department in finding new homes for current residents when the need arises. The convalescent home will remain open to convalescents, but not new residents, and will be run by the Civil Service Benevolent Fund until such time as Parliament approves its closure. This would be carried out in an orderly way, respecting the wishes and needs of the residents as far as possible.

The State Apartments at Osborne House will continue to be open to the public and managed by English Heritage who are currently making extensive plans to commemorate the centenary of Queen Victoria's death at Osborne in January 1901. I have also asked English Heritage to bring forward imaginative proposals for the use of the accommodation currently occupied by the convalescent home which will provide employment and help towards the costs of running the Osborne Estate.

Ulster Orchestra

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with the Ulster Orchestra over its future sponsorship arrangements. [69293]

Mr. Chris Smith: Matters affecting arts organisations in Northern Ireland are the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I have had no discussions with the Ulster Orchestra, but I am aware of their concerns.

Tobacco Sponsorship

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with arts organisations over the timing of legislation to ban tobacco sponsorship. [69294]

Mr. Chris Smith: Prior to the publication of the Government's White Paper "Smoking Kills" in December 1998, I received written representations from and on behalf of a small number of arts organisations and their sponsors. I also sought advice from the Association for Business Sponsorship of the Arts on the extent of arts sponsorship by tobacco companies.

Through negotiation, the Government ensured that the EU Tobacco Advertising Directive provided a reasonable time for arts and sports organisations to adapt and the White Paper explained that sports and arts organisations would be given the full five-year period allowed under the Directive to find alternative sponsors.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the present value to arts organisations of sponsorship by tobacco companies. [69295]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Association for Business Sponsorship of the Arts has estimated that the total current financial value of tobacco arts sponsorship in the UK is between £1 million and £1.5 million per annum.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Arms Exports

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what licences have been issued for the export of British Aerospace Gripen fighters and Hawk aircraft, and GKN Westland Maritime helicopters to South Africa. [64499]

Dr. Howells: I understand that none of these aircraft has previously been supplied to the South African Government by the UK. Some of the UK's leading defence companies have submitted bids against South African defence procurement requirements. No licences for the permanent export to South Africa of such aircraft have been issued by this Government. However, any subsequent applications for export licences will be considered against the criteria announced by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary on 28 July 1997, *Official Report*, columns *26–29*, and against the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the amounts of export credit guarantee covers provided to Alvis for the export of armoured vehicles to Indonesia and for the provision of upgrade components since 1988. [68780]

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much Export Credits Guarantee Department cover was provided to Alvis for the export of armoured vehicles to Indonesia and the provision of upgrade components. [68705]

Mr. Wilson: From data readily available the value of ECGD cover provided for such business since 1988 is as follows:

Year	*Amount*
1988	0
1989	0
1990	0
1991	£2 million
1992	0
1993	0
1994	£5.2 million
1995	US$105 million
1996	£65 million
1997	US$3.2 million
1998	0

EU Structural Funds

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will estimate the total amount of funding available to *(a)* South Yorkshire, *(b)* Merseyside and *(c)* Cornwall from each of the EU Structural Funds in the last year for which figures are available. [68942]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 3 February 1999]:* EU Structural Funds allocations (including Community Initiatives) for 1998 to the current Objective 1, 2 and 5b areas of Yorkshire and the Humber, Merseyside and South West England are shown in the table. It is not possible to identify specific allocations to South Yorkshire and Cornwall since under Objectives 2 and 5b the Community allocations are made to the whole of the Structural Funds' programme areas.

Structural funds allocations for 1998

£ million, current prices

	ERDF	*ESF*	*EAGGF*	*Total SFS*
Yorkshire and the Humber				
Objective 2	80	25	0	106
Objective 3/4[1]	—	28	—	28
Total[2]	80	53	0	134
Merseyside				
Objective 1 only	66	47	0	113
South West England				
Objective 5b	21	5	6	32
Objective 3/4[1]	—	20	—	20
Total[2]	21	25	6	52

[1] Estimated

[2] Excluding Objective 5a, regional figures for which are not readily available.

Electro-shock Batons

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what end use monitoring his Department has undertaken on the use of the electro-shock batons trans-shipped from the United States to Saudi Arabia via the United Kingdom under the trans-shipment licence granted by his Department in 1993. [68198]

Dr. Howells: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to her by the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Fatchett), on 1 February 1999, *Official Report*, column *494*.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Punishment Beatings and Shootings

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list for the week ending 16 January the number of *(a)* punishment beatings and *(b)* punishment shootings which took place in Northern Ireland, indicating how many in each category were committed by *(a)* Loyalist and *(b)* Republican groups. [67562]

Mr. Ingram: The number of paramilitary style assaults and shootings which took place in Northern Ireland during the period 10 January to 16 January are shown:

	By Loyalist	*By Republican*
Assaults	0	3
Shootings	2	0
Total	2	3

Note:
Figures may be subject to minor adjustment

Fair Employment

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when she plans to revoke the section 42 of the Fair Employment (NI) Act notice in respect of the Tinnelly Brothers case of Newry, Co Down. [67749]

Mr. Ingram: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is not yet in a position to make a decision on this matter. When she does, I shall reply to the hon. Gentleman as soon as possible.

Paramilitary Violence

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list for the week ending 16 January the number of violent incidents involving paramilitary groups which took place in Northern Ireland, indicating how many involved *(a)* Loyalist and *(b)* Republican groups. [67561]

Mr. Ingram: The number of violent incidents involving paramilitary groups which took place in Northern Ireland during the period 10 January to 16 January are shown:

Paramilitary style attacks:

	By Loyalist	*By Republican*
Shootings	2	0
Assaults	0	3

Total shooting incidents: 3

Notes:
Total shooting incidents include those recorded as paramilitary style attacks (2).
Only the Paramilitary style attacks can as yet be attributed with certainty to Loyalist or Republican groups.
The figures are subject to minor adjustment.

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list for each month of *(a)* 1996, *(b)* 1997 and *(c)* 1998 the number of violent incidents involving paramilitary groups which took place in Northern Ireland, indicating how many involved (i) Loyalist and (ii) Republican groups. [67604]

Mr. Ingram: The following tables give the numbers of violent incidents involving paramilitary groups which took place in Northern Ireland in 1996, 97 and 98, indicating how many involved Loyalist and Republican groups.

Casualties as a result of paramilitary style shootings, 1996–98

	1996		*1997*		*1998*	
Monthly Breakdown	*Loyalist*	*Republican*	*Loyalist*	*Republican*	*Loyalist*	*Republican*
January	1	—	8	1	5	7
February	—	—	3	—	—	4
March	2	—	8	—	1	4
April	—	1	4	1	3	4
May	3	—	2	1	4	1
June	2	—	6	2	4	9
July	—	1	2	11	4	1
August	—	—	5	1	4	1
September	3	—	3	1	2	—
October	3	—	1	1	—	1
November	4	1	2	2	4	3
December	3	—	2	5	3	3
Total	21	3	46	26	34	38

Note:

Figures are subject to minor adjustment

Casualties as a result of paramilitary style assaults, 1996–98

Monthly Breakdown	1996		1997		1998	
	Loyalist	Republican	Loyalist	Republican	Loyalist	Republican
January	14	11	7	12	5	3
February	8	14	12	14	7	8
March	9	18	7	11	6	3
April	5	18	5	6	6	1
May	11	11	7	4	8	3
June	10	25	2	1	8	11
July	14	15	8	5	7	7
August	11	16	4	4	11	2
September	8	10	5	7	9	2
October	20	10	6	4	8	4
November	13	12	8	7	6	5
December	7	12	7	3	5	6
Total	130	172	78	78	86	55

Note:
Figures are subject to minor adjustment

Deaths due to the security situation, 1996–98

Monthly Breakdown	1996		1997		1998	
	Loyalist	Republican	Loyalist	Republican	Loyalist	Republican
January	—	2	—	—	6	1
February	—	—	—	1	—	3
March	1	1	2	—	3	1
April	—	—	—	—	2	2
May	—	1	3	1	—	—
June	—	1	2	2	—	—
July	2	—	3	—	4	1
August	—	—	—	—	—	28
September	1	3	1	—	—	1
October	1	1	1	—	2	—
November	—	—	1	—	—	—
December	—	—	3	1	—	—
Total	5	9	16	5	17	37

Note:
Figures are subject to minor adjustment

Bombing incidents, 1996–98

Monthly Breakdown	1996		1997		1998	
	Loyalist	Republican	Loyalist	Republican	Loyalist	Republican
January	—	—	1	13	2	2
February	—	—	—	7	8	3
March	—	—	2	10	7	5
April	—	—	3	—	2	2
May	—	1	2	1	2	7
June	—	1	3	2	1	3
July	—	2	3	9	56	4
August	—	—	1	1	3	4
September	1	1	—	9	4	2
October	—	1	1	3	[1]n/a	[1]n/a(1)
November	—	3	—	3	[1]n/a	[1]n/a(–)
December	2	2	2	1	[1]n/a	[1]n/a(4)
Total	3	11	18	59	85	32

[1] The 5 bombing incidents during October to December 1998 are as yet not attributable to Loyalist or Republican groups, although 2 have been claimed by The Red Hand Defenders and the Orange Volunteers.

Note:
Figures are subject to minor adjustment

Shooting incidents, 1996–98

Monthly Breakdown	1996		1997		1998	
	Loyalist	Republican	Loyalist	Republican	Loyalist	Republican
January	4	2	9	1	17	11
February	3	2	4	1	2	8
March	5	3	9	5	8	5
April	—	2	8	5	9	8
May	5	4	6	2	7	1
June	2	1	8	5	5	10
July	7	15	11	47	29	2

Shooting incidents, 1996–98

Monthly Breakdown	1996		1997		1998	
	Loyalist	Republican	Loyalist	Republican	Loyalist	Republican
August	2	1	13	1	4	3
September	8	2	4	2	2	1
October	5	—	5	2	[1]n/a	[1]n/a(9)
November	5	1	4	2	[1]n/a	[1]n/a(18)
December	4	1	9	6	[1]n/a	[1]n/a(14)
Total	50	34	90	79	83	49

[1] For the period October to December 1998, other than 7 recorded as paramilitary style shootings, incidents are as yet not attributable to either Loyalist or Republican groups.

Notes:

1. Includes all shooting incidents including those recorded as paramilitary style shootings
2. Figures are subject to minor adjustment

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if the RUC has any knowledge of the identity of the *(a)* persons and *(b)* organisations who have carried out punishment beatings and shootings during 1998. [67777]

Mr. Ingram: The Chief Constable has stated publicly that all paramilitary organisations have engaged in these activities. Organisations' involvement in paramilitary attacks was the subject of a debate on Wednesday 27 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns 347–97. I would add only that if the RUC had evidence as to the identity of persons involved in this activity they would have taken steps to have the suspects brought before a court. As for knowledge, the Government does not discuss intelligence matters.

Prisoners (Early Release)

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will publish a table in the *Official Report* to show as for Monday 25 January 1999 the number of persons released early from prison under the early release legislation passed as a result of the Belfast Agreement indicating how many were *(a)* male, *(b)* female, *(c)* Loyalist and *(d)* Republican; how many of each recognised faction there are in each such category; and how many more in each category she expects to be released by the end of March 1999 or as much as such information as is readily available. [R] [67776]

Mr. Ingram: The information in respect of subsections *(a)*, *(b)*, *(c)* and *(d)* is shown in Table A as at 27 January 1999. Information is held in relation to the perceived paramilitary association of prisoners, where applicable, for management purposes. It should be noted, however, that with the exception of HMP Maze, where links are more clearly defined, this information is based on a combination of factors including the offence, sympathies and associates.

Perceived affiliation of prisoners released on licence under the 1998 Sentences Act as at 27 January 1999
Table A

Perceived affiliation	Males	Females
Loyalist		
UDA	44	—
UFF	17	—
UVF	42	—
Loyalist	4	—
RHC	1	—
LVF	1	—

Perceived affiliation of prisoners released on licence under the 1998 Sentences Act as at 27 January 1999
Table A

Perceived affiliation	Males	Females
Republican		
PIRA	107	6
Former INLA	5	2
Republican sympathiser	2	—
Total	223	8

The information regarding how many more expected releases by the end of March 1999 is shown in Table B. This is based on cases in which the SRC have already issued substantive determinations which give dates for release on licence during the specified period.

Table B

Perceived affiliation	Males	Females
Loyalist		
UDA	3	—
UVF	1	—
Republican		
PIRA	4	—
Republican sympathiser	1	—
Total	9	—

Security

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she has consulted the Chief Constable of the RUC and the General Officer Commanding the Army in Northern Ireland about the proposed strategy document on the normalisation of security in Northern Ireland as envisaged in the Belfast agreement. [68637]

Mr. Ingram: The Chief Constable, the GOC and their representatives have been fully consulted about the security strategy document which the Secretary of State intends to publish shortly.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Joint Consultative Committee

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) of 27 January

1999, *Official Report*, column 285, if he will make a statement on the outcome of his bilateral meeting with the Liberal Democrat spokesman on foreign affairs and defence. [68947]

Mr. Robin Cook: The meeting agreed to recommend discussion of Common and Security Policy issues within the framework of the Joint Consultative Committee.

Diplomatic Posts

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many British nationals are employed in the British High Commission in Cyprus; and how many have a working knowledge of *(a)* Greek, *(b)* Turkish and *(c)* both languages. [69050]

Ms Quin: I refer the right hon. Member to the answer I gave on 3 February 1999, *Official Report*, columns *683–84*.

Fishing Rights (Spain)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on Spanish fishermen crossing the boundary between Spanish and Gibraltarian territorial waters without authority and his related discussions with the Spanish Government. [69155]

Ms Quin: We do not know of any incident in which Spanish fishermen crossed the border between Spain and Gibraltar without authority. On 29 and 30 January, there were demonstrations by Spanish fishermen on the Spanish side of the border which led to the border crossing being closed. While we respect the right of the Spanish fishermen to demonstrate near the border if they wish to do so, there can be no justification for demonstrators obstructing and delaying innocent travellers. We have pursued the matter with the Spanish authorities and have urged them to make it possible for movement across the border to take place in conformity with EU obligations.

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Government of Spain in response to indications that border restrictions may be imposed on Gibraltar following the arrest of Spanish fishermen. [69095]

Ms Quin: We have made it clear to the Spanish authorities that there can be no justification for restrictions on movement across the border between Spain and Gibraltar. We look to the Spanish Government to allow movement across the border in conformity with EU obligations.

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will set out details of discussions on the issue of fishing rights which took place with the Spanish Government in October and the terms of any agreement reached. [69096]

Ms Quin: In October 1998, there was a series of confrontations in the waters around Gibraltar. We discussed these with the Spanish Government. We agreed with the Spanish Government that we should seek to revert to the more harmonious situation that had prevailed between 1991 and 1997. We reached an understanding on what that situation had involved.

Zinoviev Letter

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he proposes to publish the memorandum on the Zinoviev letter which he commissioned from his Department's historians. [69659]

Mr. Robin Cook: The memorandum is being published today and I have arranged for copies to be placed in the Libraries of the House.

Hong Kong

Mr. Alan Johnson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he plans to publish his fourth report to Parliament on Hong Kong and the implementation of the Joint Declaration. [69660]

Mr. Fatchett: The fourth report in this series, covering the period July-December 1998, was published today and a copy of the report has been placed in the Libraries of the House. The report includes a foreword written by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary. I commend the report to the House.

Yemen

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received from the President of Yemen concerning Sheikh Abu Hamza al Misary. [68794]

Mr. Straw: I have been asked to reply.

No such representations have been received.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Magistrates Courts (East Sussex)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the provision of magistrates courts in East Sussex. [67912]

Mr. Hoon: Magistrates courts are locally managed by magistrates courts committees under the provisions of the Justices of the Peace Act 1997. Decisions concerning the future of magistrates courts in their area are for the relevant magistrates courts committee to determine. A local authority that contributes financially may appeal to the Lord Chancellor against a proposed closure. The procedure for such appeals is set out in section 56 of the Justices of the Peace Act 1997. In the absence of an appeal, the Lord Chancellor plays no part in the process.

Following a period of consultation, the East and West Sussex Magistrates Courts Committees are currently considering whether to propose to the Lord Chancellor that a single magistrates courts committee should be formed. Any new Committee would still be subject to the provisions of the Justices of the Peace Act 1997.

Summary Trials (Delays)

Mr. Connarty: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what estimate he has made of the average time elapsed between persons being charged and coming to summary trial in each of the past five years. [67826]

Mr. Hoon: The exact information requested is not available. The Lord Chancellor's Department Time Intervals Survey provides the nearest available information. This survey collects information on the duration of criminal cases proceeded against in magistrates courts three times a year. The Febr[illegible] June and October surveys cover indictable cases (i[illegible]ng triable either way); the June survey also collects d[illegible]on summary cases.

The date of coming to summary trial is not recorded by the Time Intervals Survey. The nearest alternative collected by the survey is the date of verdict which the survey defines as including the date of a guilty or not guilty verdict (where there is a full trial), and the date of the acceptance of a guilty plea (where a guilty plea is entered).

For the June 1998 sample week, the survey found that the average time from charge to verdict for defendants in summary proceedings was 62 days. This figures excludes defendants where proceedings were initiated by summons and defendants in proceedings that were withdrawn or discontinued. The figure of 62 days for June 1998 compares with 67 days in each of June 1997, June 1996 and June 1995, and 65 days in June 1994.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Maples: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department which ministers in his Department made use of *(a)* RAF and *(b)* chartered aircraft between 1 October 1998 and 31 January 1999; and if he will list the dates, destinations and costs of such flights. [69075]

Mr. Hoon: Neither I nor the Lord Chancellor have made use of a RAF or a chartered flight between 1 October 1998 and 31 January 1999.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Adult and Community Education

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the co-ordination between Ofsted and the Further Education Funding Council on the inspection of adult and community education; and if he will make a statement. [68868]

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many inspections of local authority adult and community education services have been conducted by Ofsted in each of the last six years; and what proportion of Ofsted's total inspections this represents. [68870]

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to increase the total number of inspections of local authority adult and community education services. [68871]

Mr. Mudie: As part of their current corporate planning process, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has asked Ofsted to increase the number of its inspections of Local Education Authority adult education services in 1999–2000. I have asked Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools to write to the hon. Member about planned and the number of past inspections carried out by Ofsted, and to place a copy of the letter in the Library. As set out in "The Learning Age", my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State believes there is scope for some collaborative working between Ofsted and the Further Education Funding Council Inspectorate in relation to adult and community education and he will consult the Chief Inspector and the Council about ways of achieving this.

Further Education Colleges

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list each further education college with a category C financial rating, together with the current deficit of each college. [68869]

Mr. Mudie: Regular assessments to the financial health of colleges are made by the Further Education Funding Council; the details of individual colleges are treated as commercial-in-confidence. At the beginning of this year, 84 of the 435 further education colleges in England were assessed as falling into financial health category C. This is an improvement on the position at the beginning of last year when 95 of the then 444 further education colleges fell into this category.

Every year the Council publishes extracts from each further education college's audited financial statements. The extracts include the operating surplus or deficit for the year. The most recent figures are for the year ending 31 July 1997 and were published in December 1998. A copy is available in the Library.

School Closure Procedures

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received over the new procedures for proposed closures of local authority schools; and if he will make a statement. [69255]

Ms Estelle Morris: We have received no representations concerned specifically with changes in procedures for the closure of schools. Under the provisions of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, consultation in the local area and the publication of statutory proposals will continue to be necessary before a school may be closed, and anyone may object to such proposals. We are currently consulting on the detailed regulations concerning statutory proposals for changes to schools, and in formulating the final arrangements we shall be considering any points made by those responding to consultation.

Sikh Pupils

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what advice has been given to schools by his Department over requests from the Sikh community for a day's absence in April for their children in order the celebrate the 300th anniversary of the beginning of their religion. [69256]

Mr. Charles Clarke: None on this event as such. However, general advice on categorisation of absence was issued to schools in May 1994. This states that absence may be authorised where the pupil is absent on any day exclusively set aside for religious observance by the religious body to which the pupil's parents belong.

Highcliffe School

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his oral statement of 27 January 1999, *Official Report*, column 306, on Highcliffe School, what factors account for the difference between his estimated figure for the school's balance this year and that contained in the letter dated 20 January 1999 from the Funding Agency for Schools to Dorset County Council. [68989]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 2 February 1999]:* The figure in the letter from Funding Agency for Schools to Dorset County Council was for the cumulative deficit of income over expenditure for 1998–99, calculated on an accruals basis. My right hon. Friend was referring to the estimated cash balance of the school at 31 March 1999, after an £83,000 overpayment of Annual Maintenance Grant has been deducted.

Nuclear Physics (University Staff)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the *(a)* number and *(b)* age distribution of university staff specialising in nuclear physics research. [68828]

Mr. Mudie: The data requested are not available centrally. The available data relate to academic staff in UK higher education institutions in 1996–97 whose primary academic discipline is physics. A breakdown by age and primary employment function is given for full time staff in the following table:

Employment function and age of full-time academic staff in UK HEIs whose primary academic discipline is physics, 1996–97

Age	Teaching only	Research only	Teaching and Research	Total
Under 26	2	258	9	269
26–35	10	1,583	370	1,963
36–45	10	383	614	1,007
46–55	39	145	819	1,003
56 and over	22	58	585	665
Total	83	2,427	2,397	4,907

Problem Children

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment his Department has made of the current systems used by local education authorities to educate children with emotional, behavioural and psychiatric problems who do not have recognised learning difficulties. [68574]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Early identification of children's difficulties which are, or have the potential to become, barriers to learning, and measures to address these, are key elements of the government's education policy. Pilot schemes to develop work in this field are being supported in 1999–2000 through the Special Educational Needs Standards Fund Grant. Guidance in the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice, a revised version of which is expected to come into effect in 2000–01, enables Local Education Authorities to assess whether children's wider difficulties, including emotional, behavioural and psychiatric conditions, are likely to affect their learning to the extent that they need extra support.

The Department will take a keen interest in the results of the current survey being undertaken for the Department of Health, Scottish Office and Welsh Office by the Office for National Statistics Social Survey Division on the development and mental health of around 10,000 children.

Severe Hardship Payments (Scotland)

Mr. Chisholm: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many 16 and 17 year olds in Scotland applied for severe hardship payments in the latest year for which figures are available. [68770]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Richard Foster to Mr. Malcolm Chisholm, dated 2 February 1999:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has asked Leigh Lewis to reply to your question regarding the number of 16 and 17 year olds in Scotland who applied for severe hardship payments. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to Mr. Lewis as Chief Executive of the Agency. I am replying in his absence.

The latest figures available are for the calendar year 1998 and these show that 17,154 16 and 17 year olds applied for severe hardship payments in Scotland during this period.

I hope this is helpful.

Departmental Legislation

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what additional legislation, not currently before Parliament, was assumed in the production of his Department's spending allocation for 1999–2000 to 2001–02 in the Comprehensive Spending Review. [68423]

Mr. Mudie: There is a long-standing convention that legislative proposals for each year are not announced before the Queen's Speech at the start of the relevant Session.

Departmental Responsibilities

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what responsibilities which his Department had prior to the Comprehensive Spending Review are to be *(a)* discontinued by his Department, *(b)* transferred to another department, *(c)* transferred to an executive agency and *(d)* added to his Department over the period 1998–99 to 2001–02. [68407]

Mr. Mudie: Leaving aside the changes in the Department's responsibilities as a result of legislation in the 1997–98 and 1998–99 Sessions, the following changes since 1998–99 have taken or will take place:

responsibility for the grant support in respect of projects to address educational disadvantage in ethnic minorities under section 11 of the Local Government Act 1966 transfers from the Home Office to DfEE from April 1999;

responsibility for the regulation of day care under Part X of the Children Act 1989 transferred from the Department of Health to DfEE in April 1998; and

from April 1999, the Department has a new responsibility, jointly with HM Treasury and the Department of Health, for the Sure Start initiative to provide integrated services for children aged 0–3 in deprived areas.

Surplus School Places

Lorna Fitzsimons: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the numbers and percentages of surplus places are in each local education authority in England; and if he will make a statement on his policy on surplus places in schools. [69657]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The supply of and demand for school places must be brought more closely into balance to maximise parental preference and ensure good quality education in the most cost-effective way. Empty school places represent a poor use of resources, especially where those schools with high levels of surplus are also performing poorly or where parental preference is not being met elsewhere in the authority. When planning school provision, authorities should initially focus on those schools with a quarter or more of their places unfilled, having particular regard to standards at those schools. The annual survey of surplus school places provides the Department with an opportunity to monitor action by each authority.

The tables set out the numbers of surplus places as at January 1998 for each local authority area, separately for primary and for secondary, together with the proportion that these represent of total capacity. They also include the numbers of schools which at that date had a surplus of 25% or more, and at least 30 surplus places, together with the proportion that these represent of the total number of schools. The data are drawn from the returns made during 1998 by local education authorities in respect of their schools and by the Funding Agency for Schools in respect of grant-maintained schools in stage 2 and 3 authority areas. Data on surplus places in grant-maintained schools in stage 1 authorities are not available. These returns indicate that there were 761,671 surplus school places in January 1998, representing 10% of the total capacity of 7.6 million places. This is an overall reduction of just over 12,000 places on 1997 figures. The number of schools with a surplus of 25% or more, and at least 30 surplus places, also fell by 167 to 2,529 which represents 12% of the total number of schools.

The returns also provide the Department with details of what action authorities propose to take on schools with a 25% or more surplus. The returns indicate that in many cases action is being taken. Where there is no indication of action to reduce the surplus and no substantial reasons given, the Department will write to those authorities.

Surplus places by local authority area (excluding GM schools in stage 1 authorities) at January 1998

	Primary [1]				Secondary			
	Actual surplus [2]		Schools with surplus of 25% or more [3]		Actual surplus [2]		Schools with surplus of 25% or more [3]	
LEA	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Barking	1,059	6	4	8	658	6	0	0
Barnet	1,389	6	4	5	1,458	7	2	[4]10
Barnsley	1,262	6	3	3	1,655	11	2	14
Bath and NE Somerset	1,159	9	6	9	973	8	1	[4]8
Bedfordshire	3,463	13	22	16	5,340	13	10	[4]17
Bexley	1,206	6	2	3	746	5	1	[4]6
Birmingham	7,418	7	21	6	7,236	10	10	[4]13
Blackburn	840	6	5	8	499	6	0	0
Blackpool	379	3	2	6	846	11	2	25
Bolton	1,574	6	7	7	1,021	6	2	[4]13
Bournemouth	581	6	2	7	882	9	1	[4]10
Bracknell Forest	592	6	2	6	1,378	19	2	[4]33
Bradford	4,935	13	25	16	4,694	10	16	[4]20
Brent	1,776	9	4	7	1,502	10	1	[5]8
Brighton and Hove	1,877	10	8	13	1,402	11	2	20
Bristol, City of	2,655	8	14	11	2,951	15	5	23
Bromley	481	2	0	[4]0	968	5	0	[5]0
Buckinghamshire	3,212	7	16	8	2,251	8	3	[4]9
Bury	538	4	3	4	357	3	0	0
Calderdale	1,907	10	8	10	1,187	8	2	[4]13
Cambridgeshire	3,907	9	14	7	1,498	5	1	[4]3
Camden	551	5	1	2	1,313	12	2	[4]18
Cheshire	7,709	12	45	16	4,698	10	6	14
Cornwall	2,205	5	10	4	404	1	0	0
Corporation of London	17	8	0	0	—	—	—	—
Coventry	2,963	10	11	12	2,715	12	4	21
Croydon	2,065	7	7	8	2,044	12	3	[4]14
Cumbria	5,206	12	45	17	3,415	10	6	[4]14
Darlington	613	7	5	13	1,101	17	2	29
Derby, City of	1,791	9	7	9	3,018	18	3	[4]21
Derbyshire	5,670	9	34	10	5,173	11	8	[4]17
Devon	4,503	8	17	5	991	3	2	6
Doncaster	5,815	17	31	27	2,859	13	3	19
Dorset	1,945	8	10	7	2,030	7	2	[4]5
Dudley	2,852	10	8	10	1,484	7	3	[4]14
Durham	6,690	14	54	22	4,740	13	8	22
Ealing	3,028	12	11	18	456	3	0	[4]0
East Riding of Yorkshire	2,507	9	12	9	1,882	8	2	11
East Sussex	2,508	7	8	5	2,285	8	1	4

Surplus places by local authority area (excluding GM schools in stage 1 authorities) at January 1998

LEA	Primary [1]				Secondary			
	Actual surplus [2]		Schools with surplus of 25% or more [3]		Actual surplus [2]		Schools with surplus of 25% or more [3]	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Enfield	529	2	1	2	1,709	8	1	[4]6
Essex	10,411	9	44	[4]9	11,909	13	15	[4]19
Gateshead	2,052	11	11	14	2,858	20	4	33
Gloucestershire	5,045	10	30	[4]12	2,557	7	5	[4]12
Greenwich	2,038	10	4	6	1,661	11	2	14
Hackney	1,673	10	7	13	1,360	16	2	22
Halton	2,810	19	19	35	1,436	16	2	25
Hammersmith and Fulham	1,293	14	6	16	1,295	17	2	[4]25
Hampshire	8,509	8	35	8	6,139	9	6	[4]8
Haringey	887	5	4	5	850	8	0	0
Harrow	1,593	8	4	7	1,007	12	2	22
Hartlepool	787	8	1	3	863	12	0	0
Havering	1,096	5	4	6	2,150	13	3	[4]17
Herefordshire	1,506	10	9	11	1,412	14	4	29
Hertfordshire	8,627	9	50	12	10,848	13	20	[4]23
Hillingdon	1,482	7	2	[4]3	810	5	1	[4]7
Hounslow	2,167	11	7	11	1,049	7	1	[4]7
Isle of Wight	698	9	6	13	922	8	1	5
Isles of Scilly	110	44	2	50	123	52	1	100
Islington	1,709	11	10	19	1,182	14	2	22
Kensington and Chelsea	1,171	18	6	25	720	18	1	[4]25
Kent	8,443	8	43	10	10,662	11	18	[4]17
Kingston upon Hull	5,173	17	21	26	3,309	18	6	38
Kingston upon Thames	261	3	0	0	790	9	1	[4]10
Kirklees	2,462	7	8	5	2,138	8	2	7
Knowsley	2,827	15	16	26	1,599	15	1	10
Lambeth	2,784	13	9	[4]13	2,466	27	4	[4]40
Lancashire	10,170	10	61	12	6,587	9	11	13
Leeds	7,841	11	37	15	5,044	10	10	23
Leicester	3,506	12	12	14	4,516	20	9	43
Leicestershire	3,388	6	15	7	4,960	11	11	22
Lewisham	1,233	6	7	10	2,714	20	5	38
Lincolnshire	4,969	9	29	[4]10	4,158	9	8	[4]13
Liverpool	7,422	15	33	20	4,488	13	7	[4]20
Luton	2,366	12	11	16	891	7	0	[4]0
Manchester	8,528	18	36	23	6,703	23	12	43
Medway Towns	1,919	7	7	8	2,329	11	3	[4]11
Merton	655	5	2	4	1,050	12	2	[4]18
Middlesbrough	1,261	8	2	4	1,104	12	1	9
Milton Keynes	3,248	13	14	17	1,696	13	2	[4]20
Newcastle upon Tyne	3,336	15	18	23	2,456	12	4	19
Newham	1,081	4	2	3	1,530	9	2	15
Norfolk	5,798	9	39	10	4,268	10	6	[4]12
North East Lincolnshire	2,507	14	14	22	1,822	14	3	25
North Lincolnshire	1,502	10	5	7	1,393	12	2	14
North Somerset	692	5	3	5	954	7	1	10
North Tyneside	2,611	15	13	23	2,251	14	5	23
North Yorkshire	5,324	11	40	12	2,494	6	4	9
Northamptonshire	3,962	8	18	7	5,537	9	11	[4]18
Northumberland	3,439	16	32	23	4,279	13	10	17
Nottingham, City of	3,132	12	23	23	4,559	29	8	44
Nottinghamshire	5,238	8	24	8	10,277	26	15	27
Oldham	2,085	9	10	10	1,113	6	2	13
Oxfordshire	4,568	9	17	7	5,425	13	8	18
Peterborough	1,612	10	5	9	854	6	1	[4]8
Plymouth, City of	4,034	16	19	24	1,665	9	3	19
Poole	662	6	2	7	379	5	0	[4]0
Portsmouth	1,407	9	6	12	255	3	0	[4]0
Reading	764	7	4	10	1,629	21	2	[4]25
Redbridge	839	4	0	0	146	1	0	0
Redcar and Cleveland	1,975	13	9	17	1,389	12	3	23
Richmond upon Thames	354	3	0	0	357	5	1	13
Rochdale	1,050	5	2	3	2,082	13	4	[4]29
Rotherham	2,189	8	10	9	1,544	8	2	12
Rutland	695	24	5	29	216	10	0	[4]0
Salford	3,446	14	18	21	3,986	26	8	47
Sandwell	1,624	6	4	4	3,077	16	5	28
Sefton	2,754	10	15	16	2,173	10	4	18
Sheffield	3,924	9	20	14	2,447	9	3	12
Shropshire	2,525	11	18	13	1,162	7	1	[4]5

Surplus places by local authority area (excluding GM schools in stage 1 authorities) at January 1998

	Primary [1]				Secondary			
	Actual surplus [2]		Schools with surplus of 25% or more [3]		Actual surplus [2]		Schools with surplus of 25% or more [3]	
LEA	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Slough	1,205	14	3	13	540	7	1	[4]9
Solihull	1,625	8	5	7	972	6	1	8
Somerset	2,160	6	11	5	2,510	8	5	14
South Gloucestershire	1,345	6	5	5	1,071	7	1	7
South Tyneside	1,597	10	9	16	1,499	13	1	9
Southampton	2,238	11	11	16	728	6	0	[4]0
Southend	1,192	8	2	[4]5	1,333	11	1	[4]8
Southwark	2,755	13	12	18	1,459	14	4	[4]31
St Helens	1,496	9	9	15	1,438	11	2	17
Staffordshire	9,523	12	50	16	1,522	3	2	3
Stockport	2,201	8	10	9	1,562	9	1	7
Stockton on Tees	1,683	9	2	3	1,590	11	2	14
Stoke on Trent	3,844	15	18	20	1,414	10	2	13
Suffolk	4,506	9	19	7	5,205	10	7	9
Sunderland	3,728	12	22	23	1,361	7	2	12
Surrey	10,668	13	50	16	3,724	7	8	[4]15
Sutton	218	2	0	0	556	4	1	[4]7
Swindon	2,032	11	13	19	1,649	13	3	[4]27
Tameside	1,410	6	6	8	1,234	8	2	[4]11
The Wrekin	1,037	7	1	2	966	15	3	[4]23
Thurrock	1,432	10	5	[4]11	1,969	20	4	[4]40
Torbay	144	2	1	3	333	5	0	0
Tower Hamlets	2,479	11	8	11	1,717	12	1	7
Trafford	1,243	6	3	4	1,432	9	2	[4]11
Wakefield	2,841	9	14	11	1,824	9	0	0
Walsall	2,871	11	15	15	1,579	8	1	[4]5
Waltham Forest	1,480	7	4	6	1,202	9	1	[4]6
Wandsworth	1,068	7	3	6	960	9	1	[4]11
Warrington	2,390	12	14	19	1,054	8	0	0
Warwickshire	6,699	14	42	22	3,472	10	6	[4]16
West Berkshire	1,124	9	4	6	1,029	9	2	[4]18
West Sussex	5,119	8	17	7	5,860	13	6	15
Westminster	674	7	3	7	837	11	2	25
Wigan	3,913	13	19	17	1,240	6	2	10
Wiltshire	4,322	11	26	[4]12	2,091	7	3	[4]9
Windsor and Maidenhead	515	6	3	7	790	8	2	[4]14
Wirral	3,724	11	14	14	2,868	11	3	[4]13
Wokingham	524	4	3	6	514	5	1	[4]11
Wolverhampton	2,675	11	13	14	1,929	11	2	[4]11
Worcestershire	3,903	9	16	8	4,842	12	9	16
York	2,157	14	12	19	1,517	14	3	25
Total	418,386	10	2,005	11	343,285	10	524	15

[1] Primary figures show surplus after taking account of any summer entry
[2] Actual surplus is defined as the difference between capacity and number on roll for all schools where capacity exceeds number on roll
[3] Schools with less than 30 surplus places are not included
[4] Stage two for planning purposes (see [6])
[5] Stage three for planning purposes (see [6])
[6] Stage 1 = LEA has sole responsibility for planning the supply of school places
Stage 2 = LEA and the Funding Agency for Schools share responsibility for planning the supply of school places
Stage 3 = The Funding Agency for Schools has sole responsibility for planning the supply of school places

Ofsted Inspections

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many section 10 Ofsted inspections occurred in the last four school terms; [69001]

(2) how many inspectors are currently employed by Ofsted *(a)* in total and *(b)* in the IQMD division. [69002]

Ms Estelle Morris: These are matters for HM Chief Inspector of Schools and I have therefore asked Chris Woodhead to write to my hon. Friend and to place a copy of his letter in the Library.

New Deal (Basingstoke and Deane)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people have entered the New Deal Gateway in the Unit of Delivery covering the Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council area since its inception; and how many took up each New Deal option. [66369]

Mr. Andrew Smith: It is not possible to provide separate figures for individual towns or council areas. The latest Government Statistical Service figures for the Mid Hampshire Unit of Delivery, which covers Basingstoke and Deane, show that to the end of November 1998 *(a)* 267 young people had entered the Gateway and 66 have secured

unsubsidised employment; and *(b)* 26 had joined one of the four options: two on the Employment option; three on the Voluntary Sector option; and 21 on the Full-Time Education and Training option. 113 young people were on the Gateway, 13 had left New Deal to claim other benefits, nine had gone to other known destinations and 40 had gone to as yet unknown destinations.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Maritime and Coastguard Agency

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish the Derwent report on the re-organisation of the Coastguard Service and the Marine Surveyors the incorporation into the Maritime and Coastguard Agency. [68055]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The study referred to was carried out by officials and looked into the synergies between the Coastguard Agency, the Marine Safety Agency and their policy and financial sponsorship divisions in the parent Department. The output from the study was policy advice to Ministers in a previous Administration. In line with the normal convention such advice is not released.

Automatic Ticket Barriers (Undergound)

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the percentage increase in revenue occurring to London Underground arising from the installation of automatic ticket barriers at stations operated by passenger train operating companies. [68518]

Ms Glenda Jackson: As part of London Transport's Prestige PFI project, automatic ticket barriers are being installed at the vast majority of London Underground Stations. These include stations managed by London Underground that are shared with Train Operating Companies (TOCs). LT expects that this will lead to a reduction in ticketless travel and an increase in revenue. LT is discussing with Train Operating Companies (TOCs) extending gating to join stations that are managed by TOCs.

Taking a scenario in which none of the joint stations managed by TOCs on the Underground has automatic ticket barriers and comparing that with a scenario in which all of these stations had ticket barriers installed, LT estimate that the additional revenue to London Underground would be about 0.08 per cent. of total revenue or about £750,000 in one year. The calculation is based on current revenue and fares levels. There would also be revenue benefits to the TOCs, but no estimates are available.

Driving Standards Agency

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress the Driving Standards Agency has made in locating a new test centre in Stafford. [68594]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The provision of driving test centres in Stafford and surrounding localities is being kept under review. I am glad to say that the Agency has identified a suitable property in Stafford and are in negotiations with the owner. Subject to satisfactory completion of those negotiations, a new test centre could open by the Summer.

Sellafield

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress he has made with the reduction of discharges of radioactive waste from the BNFL base at Sellafield to near zero by the year 2020; and how this target will be achieved. [68853]

Mr. Meale: The Government are fully committed to the agreement reached at the OSPAR Ministerial Meeting in Sintra, Portugal last year, on the reduction of radioactive discharges from all sources, including reprocessing plants. Nuclear operators, in discussion with the relevant Government departments and regulatory bodies, will produce 20-year discharge strategies, to assess the options for reducing discharges to levels consistent with the OSPAR strategy. We intend this to be fully transparent process.

Polegate Bypass

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the total amount of *(a)* compensation paid to date and *(b)* agreed to be paid to contractors in respect of the Polegate Bypass. [68568]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The overall levels of compensation are still being discussed with those tenders who submitted tenders for the cancelled Weald and Downland DBFO Project, which include the Polegate Bypass scheme. Interim on-account payments totalling £3.4 million have been made.

Council Tax Benefit Subsidy

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list for each local authority the reduction in council tax benefit subsidy, expressed *(a)* in cash and *(b)* as a proportion of the yield from the standard council tax, that will occur in the event that each authority's budgeted expenditure in 1999–2000 exceeds by an amount equal to 1 per cent. of its standard spending assessment the point at which benefit subsidy begins to be withdrawn; and if he will make the information available to local authorities in machine-readable form. [68927]

Ms Armstrong: The information is not available.

An authority's guideline increase and its council tax increase will depend on factors such as collection fund surpluses and deficits, information on which is not currently available to my Department.

Aer Lingus Crash

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent communications *(a)* he and *(b)* other ministers have had with their counterparts in the Irish Government with regard to the crash of the Aer Lingus aircraft in 1968; and if he will make a statement. [68833]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Although my colleague, the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the regions has not been in contact with the Irish Government over this issue, I met Mary O'Rourke, the Minister for Public Enterprise, to discuss this, and other issues on 25 January 1999.

It was agreed at the meeting that UK officials (including British Air Accident Investigators) would meet with their Irish counterparts in order to review all the known evidence recorded about the crash. A meeting was held on 27 January 1999.

The Officials will work together to try and narrow the possible options for the cause of the crash.

Driving Tests (Impersonation)

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many and what percentage of candidates taking the *(a)* practical and *(b)* written driving test were arrested and charged for impersonation of the real candidate between (i) July 1996 and July 1997 and (ii) July 1997 and July 1998. [69009]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Between 1 July 1996 and 30 June 1997, 17 practical test candidates were arrested and charged with impersonation, one other candidate admitted the offence and was convicted of the offence, and two other candidates were arrested and cautioned. Sixteen cases of suspected candidate impersonation were reported to the police at the theory test stage, which resulted in two convictions. During that period, the Driving Standards Agency conducted 1.7 million practical driving tests and 1.4 million theory tests.

In the period 1 July 1997 to 30 June 1998, seven practical test candidates and six theory test candidates were arrested and charged from a total of 1.2 million practical and 1.1 million theory tests.

These figures show that the percentage of tests where impersonations were suspected is well below 0.001 per cent. in all cases.

Car Parking (Millennium Village)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many car parking spaces will be created for developments associated with the Millennium Eco-Village at Greenwich; and how many daily vehicle movements will be generated as a consequence. [69307]

Mr. Meale: The Greenwich Millennium Village will have 1,833 car parking spaces comprising 1,721 for residents, 80 for retail use and 32 for the school and health centre. 670 peak time vehicle movements are expected for the morning and 615 in the evening.

Wild Animal Imports

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what provisions are in place to prevent the import of animals subject to the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976 to Great Britain via Northern Ireland; [69284]

(2) what measures are in place to prevent exotic animals being obtained from British zoos for sale outside the United Kingdom as pets; [69286]

(3) what *(a)* measures are in place and *(b)* steps he is taking to prevent the importation of wild animals as pets. [69287]

Mr. Meale: The movement of animals between Great Britain and Northern Ireland or by zoos is not restricted, although the trade in species protected by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is strictly regulated. Those species most endangered by trade, such as tigers, elephants, chimps, etc., are subject to sale control and the owner of any CITES specimen must be able to show that it was imported or acquired lawfully. There are no plans to prevent the importation of wild animals as pets, although the import of some species has been prohibited on conservation grounds. The sustainability of the current trade is kept under continuous review.

Genetically Modified Crops

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the genetically modified trial crops currently being grown in Devon, indicating in each instance *(a)* the specific location, *(b)* the crop involved, *(c)* the reason for the crop being grown and *(d)* which company is growing them. [69338]

Mr. Meacher: There are no genetically modified crops currently being grown in Devon.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Stinchcombe), of 25 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *40*, concerning GMOs, if he will list the research studies which have indicated potential interference with ecological systems for genetically modified crops, indicating in each case *(a)* the date of the study, *(b)* the crop concerned, *(c)* the potential interference identified and *(d)* the degree of permanence in respect of potential interference. [69336]

Mr. Meacher: I am not aware of any research studies with genetically modified crops that have shown any more damaging interference with ecological systems than would be expected from the non GM crop in similar circumstances.

My previous answer referred to research studies which indicate the potential to interfere with ecosystems if the results were to be translated to the wider environment. For example, the laboratory based study by Hilbeck *et al.*, (1998) *Environmental Entomology 27 p480–487* which showed increased mortality of immature lacewing insects fed on moth caterpillars that had in turn fed on genetically modified maize expressing insecticidal Bt toxin. There is no evidence that this non-target effect on lacewings can be detected in the field when the GM maize is grown, but there may be potential for interference and the Advisory

Committee on Releases to the Environment have advised due vigilance. Similarly, the report by Bergelson *et al.*, (1998) *Nature 395 p25* indicates that GM *Arabidopsis thaliana*, a model plant used by scientists, might hybridise with neighbouring plants at a higher frequency than non GM *Arabidopsis*. If this were generally true for GM crops, and there is no evidence that it is, then hybridisation with wild relatives may be more prevalent than expected.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many test sites involving genetically modified crops were found to be breaking regulations in 1997; and if he will list in each case the *(a)* location, *(b)* crop type, *(c)* company involved and *(d)* infringement. [69279]

Mr. Meacher: Further to my answer on 17 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *630*, in the opinion of the HSE inspector there were three such instances in 1997.

Location	*Crop*	*Consent holder*	*Alleged infringement*
Holton-le-Moor, Lincolnshire	Oilseed rape	Nickersons Biochem	Isolation distance of 400m not maintained, as GM oilseed rape trial planted close to non GM oilseed rape
Invergowrie, Dundee (at two sites)	Potatoes	Scottish Crop Research Institute	Field beans grown instead of barley as the follow-on crop after the trial of GM potatoes

Park and Ride (Millennium Dome)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how many vehicles per day are expected to use the satellite park and ride sites at *(a)* Luton, *(b)* St. Albans and *(c)* Walton-on-Thames for access to the Millennium Dome; and how many park and ride buses are expected to carry visitors from each of the sites to the Dome each day; [69339]

(2) if Woolwich football ground is to be used for a park and ride site for the Millennium Dome. [69340]

Ms Glenda Jackson: None of the quoted sites is included on a short-list of six formal park and ride sites recently compiled by the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC). A car park at Woolwich Arsenal, but not the football ground, is included in NMEC's short-list.

The NMEC is planning to control park and ride sites in each quadrant within the M25 into which Millennium Experience visitors will be able to book their cars before completing their journey to the Dome on convenient public transport or shuttle bus links. It is estimated that 4,000 spaces will be required on a peak day at the Dome.

West Coast Main Line

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much of the money allocated by Railtrack for the West Coast Main Line is classified by his Department as relating to *(a)* repair and maintenance and *(b)* upgrading. [69278]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Railtrack has confirmed that money allocated for the West Coast Main Line stands at:

(a) £1.34 billion for repair and maintenance;

(b) £0.8 billion for upgrading.

Primate Imports (Research)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many of each species of primate was imported from which countries to the United Kingdom for research purposes during 1998. [69280]

Mr. Meale: The number and species of primates imported in 1998 for research purposes were as follows:

Species	*Common name*	*Country of Origin*	*Number*
Macaca fascicularis	Crab-eating macaque	Mauritius	1,972
		Philippines	144
		Israel	80
Macaca Mulatta	Rhesus macaque	China	160
Saimiri bolivensis	Squirrel monkey	USA	6
Total			2,362

Ecological Tax Reform

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what input he had into the position of Her Majesty's Government at the ECOFIN meeting on 26 January in respect of the discussion on ecological tax reform. [69248]

Mr. Meale: The meeting held on 26 January was a technical working group discussion on the draft Directive on Taxation of Energy Products. Treasury officials lead for the UK at this group, but their approach is agreed across departments.

Railtrack

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the breakdown of the moneys spent by Railtrack by classification into *(a)* moneys spent on repairs and renewal of existing infrastructure and *(b)* investment into infrastructure enhancements. [69247]

Ms Glenda Jackson: None. Railtrack is responsible for the repair, renewal and enhancement of the network and sets out its future investment plans in its annual Network Management Statement (NMS). The current NMS gives details of the forecast expenditure on maintenance and renewals and also gives details of forecast expenditure on enhancements. The form of the NMS has to be approved by the Rail Regulator who monitors Railtrack's investment and has powers to take appropriate action to

ensure that the network is maintained, renewed and developed in a way which meets the reasonable requirements of the railway industry.

UPVC Window and Door Units

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the latest guidance issued to local authorities on the use of UPVC window and door units. [69181]

Mr. Meale: There are no restrictions on the use of UPVC windows and doors in the UK and we have not issued specific guidance to local authorities on its use.

Master Mariners

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what financial assistance is available to existing master mariners who wish to meet the new international requirements coming into force on 1 February 2002. [68994]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Under the Government's Support for Maritime Training Scheme (SMarT), financial assistance of £25 a day (to increase to £26 a day from 1 April 1999) is paid to eligible SMarT Training Providers in respect of officers (including master mariners) already holding certificates of competency or service issued under STCW 78, who undertake approved shore-based training programmes in order to meet any extra requirements necessary for the issue of an equivalent certificate under STCW 95. Officers who are unemployed may apply for this assistance through Oceanair, a company operated by the officer's trade union, NUMAST.

Marine Guidance Note MGN 53(M), (to be revised in April as MGN 103 (M)) gives full details of the scheme and how to apply. Copies of the Marine Guidance Notes are available in the Libraries of the House.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the number of master mariner certificates which will become unrecognised on 1 February 2002, when the new validation requirements come into force. [68995]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The international Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping Convention 1978, as revised in 1995 (STCW 95) came into force on 1 February 1997, and the UK, as a party to the Convention, was given 5 years (until 1 February 2002) to comply with the new certification requirements.

Since certificates of competency are only valid for 5 years at a time, all current holders have been given the option of either revalidating them until 31 January 2002 under the old requirements, or for a full 5 years under STCW 95 provided they meet with the new requirements.

All valid certificates will therefore be recognised on 1 February 2002 but it is not possible at this stage to estimate how many certificated master mariners will decide not to revalidate under STCW 95.

Countryside Agency

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) when he expects to announce the chairperson of the Countryside Agency; [69333]

(2) if he will make a statement on the qualities required of a person appointed to chair the Countryside Agency. [69334]

Mr. Meacher: The Department is looking for a candidate who:

> can demonstrate an excellent knowledge of, and commitment to, countryside and rural issues;
>
> has excellent communication and interpersonal skills, and who is at ease in dealings with the media, Ministers and a wide range of partners in the public and private sectors;
>
> has experience of managing a large organisation, has the ability to lead and motivate members and staff to ensure that the two existing agencies are successfully integrated into one Agency that is well equipped to take forward its exciting new mandate.

It has taken longer than we would have wished to find the right person for this challenging role, but we expect to make an announcement shortly.

Small Public Service Vehicles

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he proposes to take to regulate further who may drive small public service vehicles. [69801]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I am concerned that public service vehicles with fewer than 9 passenger seats which may be driven by the holder of an ordinary car driving licence (category B), are being used in the same way as private hire vehicles but without the checks on drivers' criminal records and medical fitness that a local authority would usually make for the issue of a private hire vehicle drivers' licence.

I therefore propose to introduce regulations providing for criminal conviction and medical fitness checks for those driving small public service vehicles on a category B licence. The regulations would enable Traffic Commissioners to require such checks as a condition of a public service vehicle operator's licence. I will consult interested parties on this proposal.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

John Davies (European Commission Grant)

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will pursue with the European Commission their decision to pay a grant of £140,000 to the convicted criminal John Davies in respect of a service to help prostitutes in Hungary; and if she will make a statement. [69195]

Clare Short: We have contacted the European Commission on this matter. We are informed that the Commission is undertaking a fraud inquiry into the payment of the funds and their alleged misuse.

Departmental Legislation

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what additional legislation, not currently before Parliament, was assumed in the production of her Department's spending allocation for 1999–2000 to 2001–02 in the Comprehensive Spending Review. [68424]

Clare Short: There is a long-standing convention that legislative proposals for each year are not announced before the Queen's Speech at the start of the relevant Session.

Colombia

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what aid *(a)* has been given and *(b)* is planned to be given to assist people affected by the earthquake in Colombia; and what discussions she has had with representatives of the Colombian Government regarding the earthquake. [69012]

Clare Short: In total so far, my Department has contributed US$1 million through humanitarian agencies. In addition, the European Community's Humanitarian Office is providing $1.25 million of relief, of which the UK's share is around $187,500.

Our funds are supporting the Pan American Health Organisation to deploy epidemiology specialists, conduct damage assessment to health facilities, water and sewerage infrastructure and purchase medical supplies; the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to bring life-saving assistance to 100,000 people; Oxfam for a programme to provide drinking water for 80,000 people, as well as emergency shelter and household utensils, concentrating particularly on the poorer districts of the city of Armenia and outlying towns; and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to cover the immediate needs of children including those orphaned or separated from their families. Funds were also allocated to the British Embassy, Bogota for the local purchase of urgently needed medicines and chemical toilets.

We have been in contact with the Colombian authorities managing the relief operation through our Embassy in Bogota. We continue to monitor the situation and remain in close contact with the humanitarian agencies involved in the relief effort. My Department is willing to consider further requests to assist vulnerable groups where specific unmet needs are identified.

TREASURY

GDP Calculation

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what research he has commissioned on methodologies for the calculation of gross domestic product which take account of social and environmental costs of economic and industrial activities. [67676]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 28 January 1999]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. David Chaytor, dated 4 February 1999:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question on the calculation of gross domestic product (GDP).

The calculation of an adjusted GDP to take account of social and environmental costs would involve the choice of weights for a wide range of possible factors such as health, education, unemployment, air and water pollution, depletion of oil and gas reserves, loss of natural habitats and biodiversity, and then the assignment of monetary values to each of these components. The ONS does not believe that it is feasible to produce such a measure.

The Government Statistical Service is trying to take account of the social and environmental effects of economic activities by other methods. The ONS is working on extending and improving the environmental accounts, which link some of the major environmental impacts of economic and industrial activities, such as air pollution, to the standard National Accounts; while statisticians in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions have produced a set of Sustainable Development Indicators covering a range of economic, environmental and social factors to monitor progress in the Government's strategy for Sustainable Development.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Whittingdale: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what percentage of his Department's systems are millennium compliant; and if he will make a statement. [68932]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 2 February 1999]:* In common with other Government departments, the Treasury makes quarterly returns to the Cabinet Office on its progress in tackling the millennium bug. This information is placed in the Libraries of the House following the President of the Council's regular Quarterly Statement and published on the internet. The last review was published 2 December 1998.

Tax Credits

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will publish a draft regulatory impact assessment of the costs arising from provisions in the Tax Credits Bill and the accompanying regulations in relation to the new working families tax credit and disabled person's tax credit. [69146]

Dawn Primarolo: I have today placed in the Vote Office and in the Library of the House copies of a draft Regulatory Impact Assessment of the costs and benefits arising from the introduction of these two tax credits.

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will publish a draft of the regulations relating to employer payment of the working families tax credit and disabled person's tax credit. [69147]

Dawn Primarolo: I have today placed in the Vote Office and the Library of the House copies of a draft of the Tax Credits Schemes (Payment by Employers) Regulations which contain the main provisions relating to payment by employers of the new tax credits.

Budget Summary Leaflets

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the cost of preparing, printing and distributing budget summary leaflets to United Kingdom households; and how many he plans to issue. [69276]

Dawn Primarolo: No definite plans have yet been made to issue a Budget leaflet.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Mr. Key: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the total cost of the United Kingdom's contribution in Bosnia and Herzegovina since 1996; and if he will list the costs borne by each department. [68251]

Mr. Milburn *[holding answer 3 February 1999]:* The figures for 1996–97 and 1997–98 are listed as follows:

Total cost of the United Kingdom's contribution in Bosnia and Herzegovina since 1996 by department

£ million

	1996–97	*1997–98*
FCO	6.479	10.171
MOD	224.000	181.000
DFID[1] bilateral aid	42.00	22.00
Total	272.479	213.171

[1] DFID figure excludes EC attributed aid

Figures for 1998–1999 are not yet available.

Financial Services Authority

Mr. Brake: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to include promoting sustainable development among the objectives of the Financial Services Authority. [68597]

Mrs. Roche: The proposed objectives of the FSA are market confidence, public awareness, the protection of consumers and the reduction of financial crime.

ISAs

Dr. Marek: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer for what reason the Inland Revenue order line cannot respond to requests for copies of leaflet IR165 on individual savings accounts. [68231]

Mrs. Roche: Copies of leaflet IR165 are now available from the Inland Revenue Orderline and I am sorry if my hon. Friend or a constituent should have been told otherwise.

Pensions Mis-selling

Dr. Cable: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many appeals have been made against compensation for pensions mis-selling; and with what results. [68805]

Mrs. Roche: At 31 December 1998, 1,461 appeals against offers of compensation had been referred to the PIA ombudsman, 736 of these have been resolved. In approximately 50 per cent. of cases the ombudsman found the firms' offers to be inadequate.

Euro

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will prepare and publish an index of the relativities between the pound and the basket of currencies which constitute the euro so that the valuation of the pound in regard to the euro after 4 January can be compared with historical values. [68582]

Mrs. Roche: A proxy measure for the euro's exchange rate prior to 1999 can be derived by using the European currency unit's (ECU) exchange rate or using the Deutschmark and its euro conversion rate. Data on these are available in table 7.1A of the ONS publication "Financial Statistics".

Sterling-Deutschmark Exchange Rate

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the exchange rate of the pound against the Deutschmark in each quarter since January 1997. [68428]

Mrs. Roche: The exchange rate of the pound against the Deutschmark since January 1997 is available in table 7.1A of the ONS publication "Financial Statistics".

Asset Sales

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will account for the difference between the forecast of total receipts from asset sales in paragraph 2.31 of the 1998 Comprehensive Spending Review and Table 4.4 of the Economic and Fiscal Strategy report. [68392]

Mr. Milburn: There is an error in paragraph 2.31 of the July 1998 Comprehensive Spending Review White Paper. The table in the EFSR is accurate. The error was corrected by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his evidence of 15 July 1998 to the Treasury Select Committee and his correction was published in its report "The New Fiscal Framework and the Comprehensive Spending Review" released on 27 July.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what are his latest estimates of the support costs for asylum seekers charged to each of *(a)* the Home Office, *(b)* the Department for Social Security and *(c)* the Department of Health for each of (i) 1997–98, (ii) 1998–99, (iii) 1999–2000, (iv) 2000–01 and (v) 2001–02. [68388]

Mr. Milburn: Asylum support costs are currently divided between the Department of Social Security and the Department of Health. In 1997–98, asylum support cost £374.6 million, of which £305 million was borne by the Department of Social Security. Figures for 1998–99 are not yet available on a comparable basis.

From April 1999, the costs of support for adults and families will be funded from the new asylum seeker support budget managed by the Home Office. The sums of £350 million, £300 million and £250 million were allocated to this in the Comprehensive Spending Review on the basis of estimated costs for the period 1999–2002. Actual spend will depend on a number of factors, such as the number of asylum claims and the speed with which these can be handled. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary may revise these cost estimates in due course.

Environmental Working Group

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many times the interdepartmental working group on the environmental aspects of whole life costing has met; what progress has been made by the working group; when the working group will next meet; and what are the working group's future plans. [68107]

Mr. Milburn: The working group has met once, at which broad agreement was reached on the approach to be taken on the environmental aspects of whole life costing.

My officials are arranging for the working group to meet again shortly, as which its future plans will be discussed.

DEFENCE

Defence Secondary Care Agency Hospitals

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the main Defence Secondary Care Agency hospital sites with the number of clinical, professional and other whole time equivalent staff at each site, indicating in each case what decisions over the future of the site *(a)* have been taken and *(b)* are still under review; and if he will make a statement. [66468]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The details requested are as follows:

	Royal Hospital Haslar
Service	
Clinical	424
Professional medical	68
Others	45
Civilian	
Clinical	89
Professional medical	75
Others	367

As part of his recent announcement of a strategy for the future of the Defence Medical Services, the Secretary of State for Defence has declared that this hospital will ultimately close. This is unlikely to be before 2002 and will not be until acceptable alternative health care arrangements are in place. These figures update those provided to the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) on 12 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *146*.

	Duchess of Kent's Hospital, Catterick
Service	
Clinical	110
Professional medical	13
Others	39
Civilian	
Clinical	55
Professional medical	13
Others	87

These Details include personnel in the Defence Psychiatric Service units.

A review by the DSCA of facilities provided by this hospital resulted in a decision to close acute in-patient services. Following a tendering exercise, a contract has been awarded to the Northallerton NHS Trust for the establishment of a Ministry of Defence Hospital Unit (MDHU) at the Trust's Friarage Hospital. It is planned to commence the major transfer of work by 1 July 1999.

The Strategic Defence Review included provision for the enhancement of the Community Psychiatric Services. As a result, the DSCA are now in the early stages of a comprehensive review. An announcement will be made in due course.

	Defence Services Medical Rehabilitation Centre
Service	
Clinical	22
Professional medical	8
Others	82
Civilian	
Clinical	11
Professional medical	3
Others	44

Within the new DMS strategy, the DSMRC has a strong future and the DSCA will continue examining new areas in which to maximise use of the excellent facilities at the unit.

	Royal Naval Hospital, Gibraltar
Service	
Clinical	20
Professional medical	5
Others	10
Civilian	
Clinical	2
Professional medical	6
Others	28

We have withdrawn from full collaborative arrangements with the Government of Gibraltar for the provision of secondary health care. Regrettably, it was not possible to agree mutually satisfactory arrangements. As a result, the RNH in Gibraltar has reopened. Plans are progressing to develop a combined facility that will provide primary care, dental care and essential secondary care to replace the RNH early in the millennium.

	Princess Mary's Hospital, Akrotiri
Service	
Clinical	44
Professional medical	9
Others	27
Civilian	
Clinical	6
Professional medical	22
Others	16

There are, at present, no plans to re-examine the role of this hospital. Its continuing presence forms an integral part of the new DMS strategy.

	MDHU Frimely Park	*MDHU Peterborough*	*MDHU Derriford*
Service			
Clinical	129	79	99
Professional medical	8	7	3
Others	22	9	11
Civilian			
Clinical	3	0	1
Professional medical	0	0	1
Others	5	9	7

The MDHUs are working well, providing an excellent clinical environment and representing good value for money. To emphasise our commitment to this concept, the DSCA are setting new contracts in place with the NHS Trusts.

Armed Forces Pension Scheme

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if representations from the public can be made to the review of the Armed Forces Pension Scheme; [67125]

(2) when he expects to announce the conclusions of the review of the Armed Forces Pension Scheme; and what opportunities there will be for public consultation before final recommendations are implemented; [67126]

(3) what representations he has sought from *(a)* members of the armed forces and *(b)* the public on the review of the Armed Forces Pension Scheme. [67124]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Review of the Armed Forces Pension Scheme, announced in September 1998, is under way and is expected to take about a year.

The Armed Forces are fully involved in the current Review of the Armed Forces Pension Scheme. During the course of the Review, the MOD will be seeking the views of a wide range of groups including the ex-Service organisations and those responsible for other pension schemes in the public and private sectors. I wrote to a number of interested organisations and individuals when announcing the Review. In due course we shall invite comments from the public in the extensive consultation exercise, but the MOD will, of course, take account of views put forward by the public at any stage.

Departmental Responsibilities

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what responsibilities which his Department had prior to the Comprehensive Spending Review are to be *(a)* discontinued by his Department, *(b)* transferred to another department, *(c)* transferred to an executive agency and *(d)* added to his Department over the period 1998–99 to 2001–02. [68402]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Strategic Defence Review, which was a policy-led, fundamental reassessment of Britain's security interests and defence needs, considered the roles, missions and capabilities of our Armed Forces in the light of the changed strategic situation. The Review also constituted the Ministry of Defence's contribution to the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR).

The overall responsibilities of the MoD remain unchanged. Accordingly, under current planning assumptions, for the period 1998–99 to 2001–02 no responsibilities held by the Ministry of Defence before the CSR will be discontinued by this department or transferred to another department. Nor is it planned that any new responsibilities will be added to those held by the Department over this period.

A number of responsibilities will, as announced in the Strategic Defence Review, be transferred to new agencies. These are as follows: the Defence Aviation and Repair Agency will take on the aviation repair activities currently performed by the Naval Aircraft Repair Organisation and the RAF Maintenance Group. Both these old agencies will then cease to exist.

Responsibility for the storage, processing and distribution of non explosives will be taken up by the Defence Storage and Distribution Agency. On launching this agency, the Army Bases Storage and Distribution Agency will cease to exist. All explosives storage and distribution will be handled by the Naval Bases and Supply Agency.

The Defence Transport and Movements Agency will be an amalgamation of the Defence Transport and Movements Executive, the Air Movements Executive and the Joint Transport and Movements Staff and will take on the current responsibilities of these organisations. The Procurement Executive is due to become the Defence Procurement Agency and will also subsume the activities of the Specialist Procurement Services Agency.

Also as part of the development of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency's relationship to the private sector, the Defence Diversification Agency began operating in December 1998. This agency aims to encourage the transfer of technology to and from industry.

Although not part of the Strategic Defence Review, the Defence Housing Executive is due to launch as an agency on 1 April 1999.

Posthumous Pardons

Mr. Hesford: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* those serving soldiers who were executed in the First World War in respect of whom posthumous pardons have been sought who were born or resident on the Wirral and *(b)* the (i) names, (ii) regiments and (iii) offences of serving soldiers executed in the First World War who were in the (1) Cheshire Regiment and (2) Liverpool Regiment. [69243]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The place of birth and home address of accused soldiers were not routinely included in the record of their Court Martial. This information would normally be available in the individual soldier's service records, but the destruction of the majority of First World War soldiers' documents due to enemy action in 1940 means that we have no complete authoritative source for this information.

The following soldiers serving with the Cheshire Regiment and the King's Liverpool Regiment were executed in the First World War:

Cheshire Regiment

Pte. E. Bolton (10263), 1st Bn.
CM for Desertion.
Executed on 14/4/16.

Pte. E. Bryant (20101), 10th Bn.
CM for 2 x Desertion
Executed on 27/10/17.

Pte. J. Cuthbert (28719), 9th Bn.
CM for Disobedience.
Executed on 6/5/16.

L/Cpl. (Pte.) J. Holland (13857), 10th Bn.
CM for Cowardice and Leaving Post.
Executed on 30/5/16.

Pte. (L/Cpl.) W. A. Moon (17790), 11th Bn.
CM for Desertion.
Executed 21/11/16.

Cpl. G. H. Povey (10459), 1st Bn.
CM for Leaving Post.
Executed on 10/2/15.

King's Liverpool Regiment

Pte. J. Anderson (20062), 12th Bn.
CM for Cowardice.
Executed on 12/9/16.

Pte. J. Brennan (4567), 1/8th Bn.
CM for Desertion.
Executed on 16/7/16.

Pte. J. McFarlane (265427), 4th Bn.
CM for Desertion x 3 (Guilty 1 x Desertion and 2 x AWOL).
Executed on 22/5/18.

Pte. B. McGeehan (2974), 1/8th Bn.
CM for Desertion.
Executed on 2/11/16.

Pte. J. C. Smith (52929), 17th Bn.
CM for Desertion and Disobedience.
Executed on 5/9/17.

Pte. J. Tongue (11850), 1st Bn.
CM for Desertion.
Executed on 8/1/17.

Electro-shock Batons

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what occasions his Department procured electro-shock batons between 1970 and 1986 for deployment in Northern Ireland. [68227]

Mr. Doug Henderson: No records have been found relating to the procurement of electro-shock batons by the MOD.

Departmental Legislation

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what additional legislation, not currently before Parliament, was assumed in the production of his Department's spending allocation for 1999–2000 to 2001–02 in the Comprehensive Spending Review. [68418]

Mr. Doug Henderson: There is a long-standing convention that legislative proposals for each year are not announced before the Queen's Speech at the start of the relevant Session.

Aircraft Flying Hours

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what were the average flying hours in *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* 1998 for Jaguar aircraft in service with the RAF. [69006]

Mr. Doug Henderson: In both 1997 and 1998, Jaguar aircraft have each flown an average of 20.5 hours per month.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what were the average flying hours in *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* 1998 for Tornado GR aircraft in service with the RAF. [69063]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Tornado GR aircraft each flew an average of 22 hours per month in 1997 and 21 hours in 1998.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what has been the total expenditure and the breakdown of expenditure in his Department since May 1997 on *(a)* public opinion research, *(b)* television, radio and newspaper advertising and *(c)* direct mail. [63925]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Between May 1997 and December 1998, my Department's expenditure on these items was as follows:

(a) Public Opinion Research: £0.050m

Note:

This figure includes only centrally sponsored research.

(b) Recruitment Advertising: £28.256m

Note:

Advertising undertaken by my Department is principally in support of recruitment of Service personnel and civilians. The figure given may also include some other small recruitment related costs, but may omit the costs of some recruitment advertising organised locally.

Sales Promotions Costs: £0.928m

Note:

A significant element, but not all, of these costs are for advertising.

(c) My Department has no central record of any direct mail campaign having been undertaken in the period.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the total number of departmental personnel treated at NHS hospitals; how many operations were carried out on them; and what was the cost to his Department in each of the last five years. [65780]

Mr. Doug Henderson: In the case of Service personnel treated in MDHUs, the MOD pays the host NHS Trust for their treatment. The Department pays on the basis of the anticipated throughput of patients. These costs are adjusted at the end of each year in the light of the actual throughput. The number of patients treated in MDHUs and the cost of their treatment to date for each year since the first MDHU was opened is shown in the table. The available information does not differentiate between those patients admitted for surgical operations and those admitted for other treatments.

Year	*Inpatients*	*Daycases*	*Outpatients*	*Total throughput*	*Cost £ million*
1995–96	813	878	5,189	6,880	1.934
1996–97	4,246	2,197	22,887	29,330	12.050
1997–98	4,457	2,571	28,558	35,586	8.622
1998–99	4,457	2,884	27,146	34,112	9.976

Service Personnel may also be treated in any other NHS hospital as an NHS patient. The DSCA does not have visibility or control over such referrals, which would be mostly for emergency or specialist treatment. The cost of such treatment is in general met by the Department of Health, as for all other NHS patients.

Royal Hospital, Haslar

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the cash limit placed on work by his Department at the RN Hospital Haslar in each of the last five years. [65783]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Defence Secondary Care Agency took over responsibility for Haslar in April 1996. Since then, the cash limits placed on the hospital's expenditure have been as follows:

1996–97: £41.345m

1997–98: £40.314m

1998–99: £48.999m.

These are at the price base appropriate to the respective year.

Details for FYs 1994–95 and 1995–96 are the responsibility of another part of my Department. They are unable to provide the information in the timescale. I have, therefore, asked the DSCA Chief Executive to write to you separately when the information becomes available.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* doctors and *(b)* nurses have been employed and by which Government department at the RN Hospital, Haslar in each of the last five years. [65784]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The number of MOD civilian doctors and nurses employed at the Royal Hospital Haslar over the last five years are as follows:

Year	*Doctors*	*Nurses*
1997–98	24	57
1996–97	13	16
1995–96	8	3
1994–95	10	4
1993–94	5	5

Until the last year, robust manpower recording systems were not in place to ensure the provision of accurate information. The details above are, therefore, the best that can be provided from central computer records.

For military personnel, the information requested will take a little while longer to identify. I have, therefore, asked the CE DSCA to write to you separately when the information becomes available.

No other Government Department has provided doctors or nurses for work at the Hospital.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the total cost for non-departmental work at the RN Hospital Haslar and how many operations were performed on non-MOD personnel in each of the last five years. [65781]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Since the Defence Secondary Care Agency (DSCA) took over responsibility for the RH Haslar in April 1996 its total expenditure in each year since then has or is projected to be:

1996–97: £43.081m

1997–98: £41.287m

1998–99: £48.999m.

Figures for the financial years 1994–95 and 1995–96 are not held by the DSCA. These are being obtained and the Chief Executive of the DSCA will write to the hon. Member when this information is available.

It is not possible accurately to divide this expenditure between the costs of treating Service personnel and NHS patients (including MOD civilians) admitted as inpatients or for day case surgery. However, these broadly divide between the number of patients treated, which were:

Year	*Service personnel*	*NHS patients*
1994–95	2,630	10,092
1995–96	3,524	10,592
1996–97	5,054	10,554
1997–98	5,174	11,335
1998–99	3,982	8,901

The available information does not differentiate between those patients admitted for surgical operations and for other treatments.

Crown Proceedings (Armed Forces) Act 1987

Mr. Grogan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what has been the cost to public funds of the Crown Proceedings (Armed Forces) Act 1987 in each of the years since its enactment. [68306]

Mr. Spellar: The following amounts in compensation were paid in each of the financial years shown to Service and ex-Service personnel following the enactment of the Crown Proceedings (Armed Forces) Act in May 1987:

£

Financial Year	*Amount*
1987 to 1988	5,000
1988 to 1989	710,000
1989 to 1990	1,627,000
1990 to 1991	2,020,000
1991 to 1992	3,413,000
1992 to 1993	6,998,000
1993 to 1994	8,960,000
1994 to 1995	14,338,426
1995 to 1996	12,184,000
1996 to 1997	14,678,000
1997 to 1998	25,807,329
1998 to 31 December 1998	21,220,346

ACEATM

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the Aimed Controlled Effect Anti-Tank Mine; and if he will list the project milestones. [68507]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 3 February 1999]:* The Aimed Control Effect Anti-Tank Mine, ACEATM, is a collaborative programme with France and Germany. The development phase is expected to finish late this year, when France will withdraw from the programme. Subject to national approvals, the production phase would, therefore, proceed bilaterally with Germany.

On current plans, we expect to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with Germany for the production phase later this year. The first production deliveries are expected around 2,003 with UK taking delivery towards the end of the production phase leading to an in-service date no later than 2008.

ACEATM will be fully compliant with our commitments under the amended Protocol II of the United Nations Weapon Convention and the Ottawa Convention.

FOAS

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the Future Offensive Air System; and if he will list the project milestones. [68509]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 3 February 1999]:* The Future Offensive Air System will replace the capability currently provided by the Tornado GR fleet in the offensive support role in about twenty years' time. As confirmed in the Strategic Defence Review White Paper (Cmd 3999), a wide range of options to fulfil the FOAS requirement will continue to be examined, including manned aircraft, remotely piloted/unmanned air vehicles and cruise missiles. Feasibility studies into the various options are under way and continue to progress well.

Proposals for a technology acquisition programme are currently under consideration, leading to a project Assessment Phase commencing in 2001. To realise the benefits from advances in technology, and in line with Smart Procurement principles, decisions on the concepts to be taken forward as potential solutions to the FOAS requirements are unlikely to be taken for around ten years.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions he has held with NATO nations on the impact of the Year 2000 problem on interchange of defence-related electronic information and on equipment that is in common service; if interconnections between NATO nations are Year 2000 compliant; and if Year 2000 tests are included in multinational military exercises conducted with *(a)* NATO and *(b)* other nations. [68255]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 3 February 1999]:* The need for close examination of the inter-connections between NATO nations was highlighted at the Allied Year 2000 Steering Group, hosted by the MOD in November 1998. The question of the Y2K compliance of inter-connections between NATO nations is currently being examined by the NATO Command, Control and Communications board.

The UK is planning its exercise programme to enable Y2K validation to be tested in many areas. Action is also in hand to include Y2K elements in combined exercises with US forces. Discussions with our Allies on other international exercises are continuing.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what percentage of his Department's critical systems will be Year 2000 compliant by 1 April. [68261]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 3 February 1999]:* Current progress indicates that around 75 per cent. of MOD's critical systems will be Year 2000 compliant by 1 April 1999.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if his Department is collaborating with the Russian Ministry for Defence on assessing and rectifying systems affected by the Year 2000 computer problem. [68256]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 3 February 1999]:* We recognise the benefit of co-operation with Russia on the Year 2000 problem and we have taken every opportunity to brief visiting delegations. MOD officials have recently taken part in discussions with Russia on the problem under the auspices of the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council. The issue will continue to be discussed as a priority agenda item within that forum throughout the year.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the testing of all Year 2000 modified systems for which he is responsible was completed by 31 January. [68258]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 3 February 1999]:* The latest figures show that 60 per cent. of those MOD systems critical to providing defence capability, and which needed modification to make them Year 2000 compliant, had been modified and tested by the end of December 1998. Current prospects are that work on all such systems will be complete in good time to ensure that UK defence capability is maintained across the Millennium period and thereafter. Dealing with the Year 2000 problem is the MOD's highest priority, other than urgent operational needs.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans his Department has developed to support the civil community in case of emergencies associated with Year 2000. [68259]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 3 February 1999]:* Long-standing arrangements exist under which civil authorities can request military assistance in the event of a civil emergency. The extent to which military assistance may be required as a result of Year 2000 problems depends on any identified shortfalls in the ability of the civil authorities to respond to emergencies.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if systems for *(a)* service members' pay and *(b)* service members' medical records are Year 2000 compliant; and if he will make a statement. [68257]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 3 February 1999]:* A comprehensive programme of work is in place to ensure that all MOD systems, including those delivering a pay for Service and civilian personnel are Year 2000 compliant, and is on target for completion this year. This year Service pay records are archived to microfiche, for which Year 2000 compliance is not applicable.

As medical records of Service personnel are paper based, Year 2000 compliance is not applicable.

Journalists

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the expenditure by his Department on paying journalists *(a)* as an asset, *(b)* as an assistant, *(c)* as on side, and *(d)* on a keep your eyes open basis, over the period from June 1997 to June 1998. [65465]

Mr. George Robertson *[holding answer 14 January 1999]:* From time to time my Department employs journalists, for example to train personnel in media skills. Detailed information on such employment is not held centrally. No journalist paid for work by my Department is, however, appointed directly in the terms of the categories set out by my hon. Friend.

Organophosphate Lubricants

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what organophosphate lubricants are used in the engines of military *(a)* fixed winged aircraft and *(b)* helicopters; and if he will make a statement on possible health hazards for air crews. [66599]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 19 January 1999]:* The organic phosphate compound, tricresylphosphate, is present in all lubricants used regularly in military aircraft engines, to enable the lubricant to withstand the load placed on it and to prevent engine seizure. No viable alternative material is available at present.

The inhalation of mist (containing tricresylphosphate), which can be produced by high pressure systems, or direct contact with the skin, would be hazardous. We therefore have in place a number of preventative measures to prevent air and ground crews from being exposed to these hazards and also regularly review the risks to health.

Military Training (Indonesian Personnel)

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Indonesian military personnel have received training in the UK since 1 May 1997. [67601]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Since 1 May 1997, a total of 22 Indonesian military personnel have attended, or are currently attending, courses at UK military training establishments. Indonesian military personnel attending courses at non-military UK educational establishments are not the responsibility of my Department. However, based on the information available to us, we understand that a further 29 Indonesian military personnel attended, or are currently attending, courses at non-military educational establishments in the UK.

RN Base Faslane

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 20 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *460*, if he will make it his policy to carry out radiation surveys at the entrance to reactor compartments every 12 hours to coincide with shift patterns during work on nuclear submarines at RN Base Faslane. [67955]

Mr. Spellar: I wish to assure the hon. Member that the radiation surveys carried out both within and outside the Reactor Compartments of submarines meet fully our Statutory requirements. In addition to regular surveys, we also conduct continuous monitoring of the air in the Reactor Compartment for any trace of radioactive contaminants. Routine work in this area at Faslane is not based on a 12 hour shift pattern, the normal pattern being one 8 hour shift per day. Radiation surveys are carried out daily. It is not considered necessary therefore to change the frequency of the surveys.

MOD Land (Halton)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects to place in the Library a copy of the terms and conditions of the original transfer from the Rothschild family to the Government of land at Halton, Buckinghamshire. [67950]

Mr. Spellar: The Rothschild Foundation has agreed to public release of the Conveyance dated 31 March 1919, a copy of which will be placed in the House of Commons Library shortly.

Disposal Sales Agency

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the role of the Disposal Sales Agency in exporting surplus Saladin and Saracen vehicles to other countries since 1988. [68790]

Mr. Spellar: Records show that neither the Disposal Sales Agency nor its predecessor within the Defence Export Services Organisation has had any role in exporting Saladin or Saracen vehicles from the United Kingdom to other countries since 1988. A total of 37 such vehicles have been disposed of since 1988, all of which were sold commercially either within the United Kingdom or in Hong Kong. If subsequently exported, that would have been a matter solely for the purchaser to arrange, including the necessary export licences.

Clyde Nuclear Base

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the risk of *(a)* staff and *(b)* public exposure to fragments of irradiated nuclear fuel in and around the Clyde nuclear base. [68075]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 1 February 1999]:* HM Naval Base Clyde conducts only maintenance and repair on nuclear powered submarines, during which irradiated nuclear fuel neither leaves the reactor nor is conveyed to or from the Naval Base. It is legislative requirement under the Public Information for Radiation Emergencies Regulations 1992 that all nuclear operators undertake an assessment of the probability of the release of radioactive material from their operations that could lead to the exposure of the public. On the basis of such assessments there is no risk to staff or public from exposure to fragments of irradiated nuclear fuel.

Territorial Army

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which decisions on the future of the TA have been reviewed or altered by his Department since his announcement on 17 November 1998. [68480]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 1 February 1999]:* No recommendations have been made to review the decisions announced on 17 November.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations were made to his Department by *(a)* right hon. and hon. Members and *(b)* other individuals and bodies on the future of the TA between 4 November and 17 November 1998. [68479]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 1 February 1999]:* Between 4 and 17 November, my Department received 261 representations on the future of the Territorial Army. Of these, 95 were letters from hon. Members and noble Lords, and 166 were letters from other individuals and bodies. In addition to these representations, 14 Parliamentary Questions on the future of the Territorial Army were tabled between 4 and 17 November.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations have been made to him on the future of the TA arising from the announcement of his decision on its restructuring on 17 November 1998. [68481]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 1 February 1999]:* Since the announcement of the restructuring of the Territorial Army on 17 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns 749–71, my Department has received 361 representations on the matter, as of 29 January 1999. Of these, 140 were letters from hon. Members and noble Lords, and 221 were letters from other individuals. In addition to these representations, 81 Parliamentary Questions on the future of the Territorial Army have been tabled since 17 November.

Multi-role Armoured Vehicle

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the Multi-role Armoured Vehicle; and if he will list the project milestones. [68508]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 3 February 1999]:* The Multi-role Armoured Vehicle programme will provide a family of armoured utility vehicles to replace the FV430 series, Saxon and CVR(T) vehicles. The Memorandum of Understanding for the development and initial production phase has been signed and we are working with our French and German partners, and with industry, to place a contract shortly. Firm milestones will be identified during the development phase.

FASH

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future amphibious support helicopter; and if he will list the project milestones. [68500]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 3 February 1999]:* The Future Amphibious Support Helicopter, FASH, is intended to replace the Westland Sea King Mk 4 helicopter in around ten years' time in the role of support of amphibious operations. We are currently assessing a number of different solutions to meet the FASH requirement. Current planning would lead to the issue of an Invitation To Tender in 2001.

Air-launched Anti-armour Weapon

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the air-launched anti-armour weapon; and if he will list the project milestones. [68503]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 3 February 1999]:* The air-launched anti-armour weapon is designed to reduce the fighting power of enemy armoured forces as early and as far forward as possible by defeating modern and future Main Battle Tanks, Armoured Personnel Carriers and Self Propelled Guns. It is intended to be fitted on Tornado GR4, Harrier GR7 and Eurofighter. Following international competition a development and production contract was awarded to GEC Marconi Radar and Defence Systems for their BRIMSTONE weapon system on 6 November 1996.

The first flight of the missile on a Tornado took place in December 1998. Forthcoming milestones for the project are:

the completion of launcher development in April 1999,

air firing trials starting in June 1999; and

flight trials and the demonstration of seeker performance in August 1999.

Lightweight Mobile Artillery Weapon System

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on progress on the Lightweight Mobile Artillery Weapon System; and if he will list the project milestones. [68512]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 3 February 1999]:* The Lightweight Mobile Artillery Weapon System programme is still at an early stage, but is currently expected to involve a mix of systems, including a lightweight 155mm howitzer. Other elements of the programme are less well defined at present. The UK entered into co-operation with the US on their Lightweight 155mm Howitzer development programme in 1998, to allow us to benefit from information generated by the US programme, before making a decision on the way forward. On current plans, we expect the howitzer to enter UK service in 2007.

Bowman Project

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the Bowman project; and if he will list the project milestones. [68510]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 3 February 1999]:* Project Bowman will provide the Armed Forces with a new tactical combat radio communications system to replace the Clansman system, with a planned In Service Date of March 2002. The Prime contractor is Archer Communications Systems Ltd., who are currently completing system definition, including initiating key development work with sub contractors, commencing system integration, and demonstrating technical progress. On current plans, MOD intend to commit to the production and supply of the system towards the end of this year. The Bowman Project will be included in the first wave of Integrated Project Teams from 1 April 1999.

Terrier Project

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the Terrier project; and if he will list the project milestones. [68757]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 3 February 1999]:* Terrier will replace the in-service Combat Engineer Tractor and will provide battlefield mobility/counter mobility by performing Engineer tasks. Tenders for the Project Definition phase have been received recently from three companies, Alvis, Marconi Marine and Vickers Defence Systems and are currently being assessed. It is planned to place two competitive Project Definition contracts later this year, leading to the selection of a contractor for Full Development and Production. The vehicle is currently expected to enter service in 2008.

ASTOR

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the airborne stand-off radar project; and if he will list the project milestones. [68501]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 3 February 1999]:* The Airborne Stand-Off Radar, ASTOR, project is a long range theatre surveillance and target acquisition system required to operate in all weathers by day and night. The airborne component of the system will be fitted in a commercial business jet, which offers the best balance of payload, survivability, height capability and endurance.

The MOD is currently in the process of evaluating bids for the Full Development and Production phase of the project, and it would, therefore, not be appropriate to make specific comments on any aspect of the bids at this time. On current plans we aim to announce a decision on the project in the spring, and award a contract later this year. The In-Service Date will be dependent on the selected bid.

Skynet

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the Skynet 5 UK Military Satellite Communications System; and if he will list the project milestones. [68505]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 3 February 1999]:* The requirement for UK military satellite communications is currently met by the Skynet 4 Stage 1 system, which is being replaced by three new Skynet 4 Stage 2 satellites, the first of which entered service in May 1998. These, in turn will require replacement in the middle of the next decade. The programme to provide this future capability is known as Skynet 5. The preferred option is for the requirement to be met by a PFI service based solution.

The MOD is currently in the process of evaluating proposals from industry for the Design Phase of the programme and it would, therefore, not be appropriate to make specific comments on any aspect of the bids at this time. The contracts for this phase are due to be placed in February 1999. The Implementation phase is planned to commence in 2002, with initial communication services commencing in 2006.

Future Carrier-borne Aircraft

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on Future Carrier-Borne Aircraft; and if he will list the project milestones. [68513]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 3 February 1999]:* As announced in the Strategic Defence Review a Future Carrier Borne Aircraft will replace the Harrier. A decision on the aircraft type is expected to be taken in late 2000. The In-Service Date remains at 2012.

COBRA

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the counter-battery radar (COBRA) project; and if he will list the project milestones. [68755]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 3 February 1999]:* COBRA is a collaborative project between the UK, France and Germany to develop and produce a Counter Battery Radar with a capability to locate hostile rocket, gun, mortar batteries at long range. The COBRA project entered the Industrialisation and Production phase with the prime contractor, EURO-ART, in March 1998. On current plans we expect delivery of the first UK Radar System Vehicle in late 2001, with the system expected formally to enter service about a year later.

Kosovo

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he has made of the number of British troops which could be deployed indefinitely to Kosovo without causing the assumptions underlying the Strategic Defence Review to be revised. [69189]

Mr. George Robertson: The assumptions underlying the Strategic Defence Review were intended to guide force structure planning rather than decisions about individual deployments. A deployment to Kosovo would not invalidate these assumptions.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps have been named for duty in Kosovo. [69190]

Mr. George Robertson: The Headquarters of the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps has been involved in Nato planning in relation to Kosovo, but no decision has been taken to proceed with any operation.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what British military forces the Nato Secretary General has authority to order into action following the response of both parties to the Contact Group's proposals on Kosovo. [69188]

Mr. George Robertson: The North Atlantic Council on 30 January agreed that the Nato Secretary General may authorise air strikes against targets on FRY territory. He will take his decision in the light of both parties' compliance with international commitments and requirements, including in particular assessment by the Contact Group of the response to its demands.

The RAF assets dedicated to these air operations consist of eight Harriers and two tankers in Italy. Furthermore, HMS Iron Duke, a Type 23 frigate, which is part of the Nato Standing Force Mediterranean, is now situated in the Adriatic.

Taiwan (Exports)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the restrictions placed on the United Kingdom defence industry in respect of exports of equipment and technology to Taiwan. [69008]

Mr. Fatchett: I have been asked to reply.

Applications for export licences to supply defence-related equipment and technology to Taiwan are considered case-by-case. All decisions are made in the light of the criteria announced by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary on 28 July 1997, *Official Report*, columns *26–29*. In scrutinising applications for Taiwan, we give particular weight to the implications for regional security.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Mortgage Applications (Fraud)

34. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Attorney-General how many cases involving fraud on mortgage applications have been prosecuted by the CPS in each of the last five years. [67832]

The Attorney-General: The Crown Prosecution Service holds no central records in respect of the number of cases involving fraud on mortgage applications which have been prosecuted by the Crown Prosecution Service in each of the last five years. The information is held on individual case files and could be obtained only at a disproportionate cost.

Nolle Prosequi

36. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Attorney-General on how many occasions he has exercised the procedure of Nolle Prosequi since May 1997. [67834]

The Attorney-General: Statistics are not maintained of how many nolle prosequi are granted. However, a search of files held by my office has identified five occasions since May 1997 when a nolle prosequi has been granted.

Al Shifa Factory (Khartoum)

37. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Attorney-General if he will make a statement on his communications with the Attorney-General of the United States in relation to the legality of the US military strike against the Al Shifa factory in Khartoum. [67835]

The Attorney-General: The legality of the US action against the Al Shifa action factory in Khartoum is a matter for the United States. I had no communications with Attorney-General Reno on the matter.

Crown Prosecution Service

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Attorney-General what plans he has to review aims and objectives of the Crown Prosecution Service. [67833]

The Solicitor-General: The overall aim of the Crown Prosecution Service is to contribute to the reduction both of crime and the fear of crime and to increased public confidence in the criminal justice system by fair and independent review of cases and by firm, fair and effective prosecution to court. The aim is consistent with, and supports, the wider aims which this Government have established for the first time for the criminal justice system as a whole.

The objectives of the CPS have been revised to take account of the Glidewell recommendation that they should focus more on the CPS core business of prosecution.

Ministerial Flights

Mr. Maples: To ask the Attorney-General which ministers in his Department made use of *(a)* RAF and *(b)* chartered aircraft between 1 October 1998 and 31 January 1999; and if he will list the dates, destinations and costs of such flights. [69079]

The Attorney-General: None.

WALES

Public Bodies

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list those bodies in Wales to which the Welsh Assembly will be able to appoint members. [68349]

Mr. Michael: Responsibility for making appointments to the following bodies in Wales will transfer from the Secretary of State for Wales to the National Assembly for Wales when the Assembly assumes its functions:

Welsh Executive NDPBs:

- Agricultural Wages Committees for Clwyd, Dyfed, Glamorgan, Gwent, Gwynedd, Powys.
- Arts Council of Wales
- Cardiff Bay Development Corporation
- Countryside Council for Wales
- Further Education Funding Council for Wales
- Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
- National Library of Wales, Council
- National Museums & Galleries of Wales, Council
- Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales
- Sports Council for Wales
- Wales Tourist Board
- Welsh Development Agency
- Welsh Health Commons Service Authority (residuary appointments to 30 June 1999)
- Welsh Language Board
- Welsh National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting

Welsh Health Bodies:

- Health Promotion Authority for Wales (until 2000)

Health Authorities:

- Bro Taf;
- Dyfed Powys;
- Gwent;
- Iechyd Morgannwg;
- North Wales.

NHS Trusts:

- Bro Morgannwg;
- Carmarthenshire;
- Conwy & Denbighshire;
- Ceredigion;
- Gwent Healthcare;
- North Glamorgan;
- North East Wales;
- North West Wales;
- Pembrokeshire and Derwen;
- Pontypridd & Rhondda;
- Powys Health Care;
- Swansea;
- Velindre;
- Welsh Ambulance Services.

Welsh Advisory NDPBs:

- Ancient Monuments Board for Wales
- Environment Agency Advisory Committee for Wales
- Hill Farming Advisory Sub-Committee for Wales
- Historic Buildings Council for Wales
- Library and Information Services Council (Wales)

Local Government Boundary Commission for Wales

Place Names Advisory Committee

Social Services Inspectorate Advisory Group for Wales

Welsh Committee for the Professional Development of Pharmacy

Welsh Advisory Committee on Drug and Alcohol Misuse

Welsh Industrial Development Advisory Board

Welsh Tribunals:

Rent Assessment Panels for Wales

Welsh Others:

Community Health Councils. The responsibilities and scope of CHCs are currently under review, but the present councils cover the following areas:

Brecknock/Radnor;

Bridgend;

Caerphilly;

Cardiff;

Carmarthen/Dinefwr;

Ceredigion;

Conwy;

Dyffryn Clwyd;

Gogledd Gwynedd;

Llanelli/Dinefwr;

Meirionnydd;

Merthyr & Cynon Valley;

Montgomery;

Neath & Port Talbot;

North East Wales;

North Gwent;

Pembrokeshire;

South Gwent;

Swansea;

Taff Ely & Rhondda;

Vale of Glamorgan;

Ynys Môn;

Council of St. David's University of Wales, Lampeter

Court and Council of University of Wales, Aberystwyth

Court of University of Wales, Bangor

Court of University of Wales, Swansea

Food Strategy Advisory Group

NHS Complaints Procedure: Independent Review Panels

National Library of Wales, Court

National Museums and Galleries of Wales, Court

National Park Authorities:

Brecon Beacons;

Pembrokeshire Coast;

Snowdonia.

Saundersfoot Harbour Commission

Sea Fisheries Committee—South Wales

Wales Multi Research Ethics Committee

Wales New Deal Advisory Task-force.

It may be helpful to the right hon. Gentleman to note that the Cabinet Office publication 'Public Bodies 1998' explains the categories of public bodies as follows:

Executive NDPBs: These bodies carry out a wide variety of administrative, regulatory and commercial functions. They generally operate under statutory provisions, employ their own staff and have responsibility for their own budgets.

Advisory NDPBs: These are generally set up administratively by Ministers to advise them and their departments on matters within their sphere of interest. Some Royal Commissions are classified as Advisory NDPBs. Generally, advisory NDPBs are supported by staff from the sponsor department, and do not incur expenditure on their own account.

Tribunal NDPBs: This category covers bodies with jurisdiction in a specialised field of law. In general, tribunals are serviced by staff from the sponsor department.

Other bodies: These tend to be bodies which operate at a local level and include local authority planning bodies; CHCs and University Courts and Councils.

Health and Education Spending Plans

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on his public spending plans for health and education in the next three years. [68359]

Mr. Michael: The Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) provided an extra £1.030 billion for the NHS in Wales—£175 million next financial year, £345 million in 2000–01 and £510 million in 2001–02. I am now considering in detail my spending priorities in view of the range of pressures and will make a further announcement in due course.

For education I am making available an additional £117 million next financial year, £262 million in 2000–01 and £399 million in 2001–02. I will be announcing further details very soon.

In future these decisions will be a responsibility of the National Assembly.

Primary Health Care

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the role of primary health care provision in North Wales. [68362]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The North Wales Health Authority is responsible for assessing, monitoring and arranging for the provision of health services in its area in order to meet clinical needs. This responsibility extends over both the primary and secondary sectors.

The Welsh Office maintains oversight of health authorities in Wales; in the exercise of these functions officials meet representatives of each authority on a regular basis to review and report on progress.

The Government's White Paper "Putting Patients First" set out our proposals for restoring and modernising the NHS. The aim is to ensure that services are developed in partnership and driven by a concern for quality, effectiveness and efficiency. Primary health care provision has a key role to play in that process and Local Health Groups will be established on 1 April. These groups will harness the skills and experience of primary care professionals and will work with partners such as local

authorities and the voluntary sector, to ensure that the services provided are responsive to the needs and circumstances of local people.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Health Care Provision

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what steps he has taken to improve the provision of health care for children. [68364]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Our aim to improve the health and well-being of children in Wales is set out in the Green Paper "Better Health, Better Wales" (Cm 3922). Work is in hand to develop a children's strategy which will set clear objectives and principles to govern the development and delivery of children's services in Wales. A set of targets for children's health has been developed to measure improvements in children's health over the next five years.

"The Health of Children in Wales" report sets out the statutory and policy requirements for high quality services for children and has been issued to all health authorities, health trusts and local authority social services departments in Wales. Progress in implementation of the report is being monitored.

We have announced additional funding to establish a paediatric intensive care unit at the University Hospital of Wales, Cardiff (UHW). This unit will ensure that seriously ill children receive high quality specialised intensive care.

We have set aside £25 million to establish a "Sure Start" programme in Wales over the next three years. The programme will aim to improve the health, welfare and social development of very young children particularly in areas of greatest disadvantage.

Local authorities in Wales will have an extra £5 million of earmarked resources in 1999–2000 to begin making improvements to the quality and outcomes of services they provide for children. They will have to take into account the Government's response to the Children's Safeguards Review (Cm 4105), which includes range of proposals to improve the health of looked after children by local authorities and other public agencies. The response to the Review also sets out the new arrangements for monitoring and safeguarding the welfare of children in hospitals, nursing homes and hospices.

We have published an action programme for improved planning of special education needs (SEN) provision for children with disabilities and will be funding pilot projects in Wales in 1999–2000.

The recent White Paper "Smoking Kills" (Cm 4177) announced a comprehensive package of measures designed to discourage children from taking up smoking and to adopt healthier life styles.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Theatres and Orchestras

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is his policy on the funding of regional *(a)* theatres and *(b)* orchestras. [68360]

Mr. Michael: Welsh Office support for the arts is channelled through the Arts Council of Wales (ACW), which takes decisions on the detailed financial allocation to individual arts organisations. The ACW is in the process of consulting the public on its future strategy. I have helped that process by providing the ACW with the first real terms increase in its budget for a number of years. I have also announced a new programme on the next three years to develop and support orchestral and ensemble music involving children and young people.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Departmental Responsibilities

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what responsibilities which his Department had prior to the Comprehensive Spending Review are to be *(a)* discontinued by his Department, *(b)* transferred to another department, *(c)* transferred to an executive agency and *(d)* added to his Department over the period 1998–99 to 2001–02. [68396]

Mr. Michael: No responsibilities will be discontinued. The great majority of functions administered by my Department, and some responsibilities which currently fall to other departments, will be transferred to the National Assembly for Wales later this year. These will be as set out in the Transfer of Functions Order which I published for consultation last November, and which I hope to lay before Parliament shortly. In addition, responsibility for section 11 of the Local Government Act 1966, as it applies to Wales, will be transferred to my Department by the Home Office from April 1999.

Departmental Legislation

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what additional legislation, not currently before Parliament, was assumed in the production of his Department's spending allocation for 1999–2000 to 2001–02 in the Comprehensive Spending Review. [68412]

Mr. Michael: There is a long-standing convention that legislative proposals for each year are not announced before the Queen's Speech at the start of the relevant Session.

National Assembly

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he expects to receive the report of the commissioners appointed to prepare draft standing orders for the National Assembly for Wales. [69805]

Mr. Michael: The Commissioners' chair, Mr. Gareth Wardell, wrote to me on 22 January, enclosing a comprehensive set of draft standing orders. I am very grateful to the Commissioners for the work they have undertaken on this extremely important task.

I am arranging for copies of the Commissioners' report to be placed in the libraries of the House. I am also writing to the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) and the hon. Members for Brecon and Radnor (Mr. Livsey) and for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), inviting their parties' views on the Commissioners' work. I expect to make the standing orders in their final form in March.

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what educational publicity campaign he plans to undertake, at what estimated cost, to inform electors of the new proportional voting system to be used in the election for the Welsh Assembly. [69187]

Mr. Michael: Information about the voting system will be given as part of the overall information campaign to increase public awareness of the Assembly and its powers together with the greater accountability for decisions in Wales once the Assembly is in place. I have now allocated some £2 million for the National Assembly Information Campaign.

Waiting Lists

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on waiting lists in Wales. [69542]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: I am pleased to announce that, as a result of the £20 million invested in the NHS by the Government and the hard work of the NHS staff, the inpatient waiting list fell over the three months to November 1998 to stand at 71,264—the lowest figure since February 1998. The numbers waiting over 12 months and 18 months fell by 329 and 323 respectively in November.

Outpatient lists have increased by 11 in November while the number waiting over 6 months for an appointment rose by 232, an increase of 1.3 per cent.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

Secretary of State (Responsibilities)

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on his responsibilities following the establishment of the National Assembly for Wales. [68552]

Mr. Michael: Immediately after the election of the National Assembly for Wales I will retain all my current functions. A few weeks later I will transfer most of these functions to the Assembly in accordance with the Transfer of Functions Order. The Assembly will then become the centre of democracy within Wales. After that, the Secretary of State for Wales will continue as a member of the UK Cabinet and will have responsibility for primary legislation where it is proposed that powers be given to the Assembly, for Parliamentary procedures relating to those subordinate legislative instruments made by the Assembly which are still subject to such procedures, for securing and giving the Assembly its annual budget, for consulting the Assembly on the Government's legislative programme, for Welsh matters connected with the Palace and for minority languages.

Some of the powers under the Government of Wales Act 1998 which the Secretary of State will exercise as part of the transfer of functions are not time limited so that he or she may apply the Act to changed circumstances; for example, he or she may add to the powers of the Auditor General for Wales if a new function is transferred to the Assembly which involves the preparation of accounts and make provisions about the accounts of any new public body that may be created with functions that relate only to Wales.

Arts Council

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received concerning the level of funding for the Arts Council of Wales for 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [68812]

Mr. Michael: I have received no representations in response to my announcement that the Arts Council's grant in aid for 1999–2000 will increase by 3.1 per cent. to £14.8 million. This is the first increase given to the Arts Council since 1995–96.

In future this will become the responsibility of the National Assembly.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Departmental Legislation

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what additional legislation, not currently before Parliament, was assumed in the production of his Department's spending allocation for 1999–2000 to 2001–02 in the Comprehensive Spending Review. [68420]

Mr. Straw: There is a long-standing convention that legislative proposals for each year are not announced before the Queen's Speech at the start of the relevant Session.

My Department's spending allocation following the Comprehensive Spending Review does, however, take account of the Bill announced in the Queen's Speech on 24 November 1998 to modernise the law on immigration and asylum, including reform of the appeals system and new support arrangements for asylum seekers.

Departmental Responsibilities

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what responsibilities which his Department had prior to the Comprehensive Spending Review are to be *(a)* discontinued by his Department, *(b)* transferred to another department, *(c)* transferred to an executive agency and *(d)* added to his Department over the period 1998–99 to 2001–02. [68404]

Mr. Straw: From April 1999, my Department is transferring to the Department for Education and Employment and to the Welsh Office responsibility for funding grants under section 11 of the Local Government Act 1966 for educational projects to help members of ethnic minorities to overcome disadvantage due to differences of language or culture. This represents 97 per cent. of the total value of grants paid under section 11. My Department is currently considering what arrangements might best be made for funding such work in areas other than education.

My Department took on responsibility for freedom of information from the Cabinet Office on 31 July 1998.

From April 1999, my Department will manage the new asylum seekers' budget which will meet the costs of support for adults and families seeking asylum. These costs are currently met from budgets managed by the Department of Social Security and the Department of Health.

Burglars (Sentencing)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what research his Department has evaluated into the expected financial costs and savings which will occur due to implementation of the proposed mandatory sentence for repeat burglars; if he will indicate the assumptions underlying such research; and if he will make a statement. [68948]

Mr. Boateng: We estimate that the implementation of section 4 of the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997 will add between 4,000 and 4,400 to the prison population over 10 years. These estimates are based on a sample of offenders convicted in four weeks in 1997 and include an allowance of 1,000 prison places for the indirect effects on convictions for similar offences, such as a second conviction for burglary. The range of figures reflects different assumptions about the deterrent effect of implementation: the higher figure assumes no reduction in the requirement for prison places as a result of deterrence.

The latest long-term projections for the prison population are lower than had previously been the case. The Prison Service can now expect to cope with the extra prison places within existing provision at least for the next three years.

Police Stations (Disabled Access)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many and what percentage of police stations in each police force are accessible to disabled people; and if he will make a statement. [68957]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is not collected centrally in the manner requested. The Audit Commission published details, in January 1999, of the number of police authority buildings open to the public and those which have access to and are usable by the disabled. These are set out in the table.

Police authority	*Buildings open to public*	*Accessible/ usable by disabled*	*Percentage*
Avon and Somerset	46	7	15
Bedfordshire	12	1	8
Cambridgeshire	29	1	3
Cheshire	40	3	8
City of London[1]	4	3	75
Cumbria	24	5	21
Derbyshire	29	1	3
Devon and Cornwall	51	19	37
Dorset	35	23	66
Durham	13	0	0
Dyfed-Powys	55	1	2
Essex	105	7	7
Gloucestershire	52	3	6
Greater Manchester	74	6	8
Gwent	58	6	10
Hampshire	54	28	52
Hertfordshire	23	4	17
Humberside	28	14	50
Kent	36	0	0
Lancashire	113	17	15
Leicestershire	27	7	26
Lincolnshire	24	8	33
Merseyside	47	19	40
Norfolk	46	16	35
Northamptonshire	12	10	83
Northumbria	51	8	16
North Wales	61	46	75
North Yorkshire	33	0	0
Nottinghamshire	69	4	6
South Wales	55	13	24
South Yorkshire	91	12	13
Staffordshire	49	3	6
Suffolk	28	8	29
Surrey	30	0	0
Sussex	32	25	78
Thames Valley	43	7	16
Warwickshire	20	8	40
West Mercia	54	6	11
West Midlands	68	27	40
West Yorkshire	50	0	0
Wiltshire	25	2	8
Metropolitan police	191	81	42
Totals	1,987	459	23

[1] Home Office figures

Source:

Figures published by the Audit Commission: January 1999

HMP Coldingley

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish the results of the internal audit into the letting of the workshop contract at HMP Coldingley to Wackenhut UK. [68945]

Mr. George Howarth: The report by Prison Service Internal Audit on this matter is an internal management document, concerning actions which are the subject of a disciplinary inquiry as well as issues which are subject to discussion with the contractor. It is not intended to publish it.

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what sums are owed by Wackenhut UK to the prison service in lieu of the workshop contract at HMP Coldingley; what steps are being taken by his Department in relation to this contract; and if he will make a statement. [68944]

Mr. George Howarth: The contract for the management of the industries at Coldingley Prison ended on 31 January 1999 following the receipt of notice of termination from the contractor, Wackenhut (UK) Limited.

At 29 January, invoices totalling £170,531.18 payable under the terms of the contract had been presented to Wackenhut, but not yet paid; however, none were beyond the 30-day payment period. Additionally, Wackenhut are liable to make a final payment of £26,250 in February to complete repayment of a loan.

The Prison Service is in the process of establishing other sums due, in relation to operation of the contract during January, handover of assets at the end of the contract and other matters. Further invoices will be issued in due course.

The Prison Service has also started a disciplinary inquiry relating to concerns raised by an internal audit report on the operation of the contract.

Public Safety Radiocommunications Project

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police forces implemented all necessary measures under the new Public Safety

Radiocommunications project; what is the expected date of implementation in each police force; what is the total capital cost to each police force of implementing the system; what is the expected annual running cost of the system for each police force; and if he will make a statement. [68951]

Mr. Boateng: All forces in England and Wales have been actively involved in Public Safety Radiocommunications project through establishment of dedicated teams, participation in regional user groups, direct consultations with the Police Information Technology Organisation (PITO), which is managing the project, and a programme of force visits by the prospective service provider, BT.

PITO have provided the provisional implementation dates for each force which are shown in the table.

Budgeting for the take up of the service will be based on the agreed roll-out programme and is the responsibility of each Police Authority. Definitive costs are not available at this stage and are the subject of on-going negotiation.

Provisional implementation dates

Force	*Force wishes*	*Quadrant proposal*
Avon and Somerset	2000	2001 (Q1)
Cambridgeshire	2000–01	2002 (Q1)
Cleveland	2000	2000 (Q4)
Devon and Cornwall	2000	2000 (Q4)
Durham	2001	2001 (Q1)
Dyfed Powys	1999	2001 (Q1)
Northumbria	2000	2001 (Q1)
Nottinghamshire	2002	2002 (Q1)
Wiltshire	2000	2001 (Q1)
Metropolitan Police Service	2003	2002–3
Lancashire	Pilot	1999
Derbyshire	2000–01	2000
Gloucestershire	2000	2000
Greater Manchester Police	2000	2000
Leicestershire	2000	2000
Merseyside	2000	2000
North Yorkshire	1999	2000
Suffolk	2000–01	2000
West Mercia	1999	2000
Dorset	2000	2001
Gwent	2000	2001
Hampshire	2000	2001
Hertfordshire	2001	2001
South Wales	2001	2001
Thames Valley	2001	2001
Bedfordshire	2001	2002
Cheshire	2002–03	2002
Cumbria	2001	2002
Humberside	2002	2002
North Wales	2002	2002
South Yorkshire	2003	2002
Sussex	2001	2002
West Midlands	2003	2002
West Yorkshire	2003	2002
City of London	2003	2003
Essex	2003	2003
Kent	2003	2003
Lincolnshire	2003	2003
Norfolk	2001	2003
Northamptonshire	2003	2003
Staffordshire	2003	2003
Surrey	2003	2003
Warwickshire	2003	2003

Police Efficiency

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list Her Majesty's National Inspectorate of Constabulary and Audit Commission proposals for improving police efficiency which are being implemented by his Department; and if he will make a statement. [68956]

Mr. Boateng: On 4 November 1998, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary wrote to all police authorities and forces, with guidance on making efficiency plans to deliver the 2 per cent. reinvestment from efficiency gains which my right hon. Friend required for 1999–2000.

This guidance drew heavily on areas for improved efficiency, suggested by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) in its 1998 thematic report on value for money and efficiency, "What Price Policing?". The Audit Commission also report on police performance, as required under the Local Government Act 1992. They compare force date in different police authority areas, and work closely with the Inspectorate to advise and support the Secretary of State. Both HMIC and the Audit Commission have identified that better use of assets and procurement practice, reviewing specialist units and administrative arrangements, reducing sickness and improved management of medical retirements can contribute to improved management of medical retirements can contribute to improved police performance. Copies of all the relevant reports are in the Library.

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidance his Department has issued to police forces in respect of obtaining the 2 per cent. efficiency gains demanded by his Department in each of the next three years; what is his policy towards police forces reducing police officer numbers to achieve these gains; and if he will make a statement. [68949]

Mr. Boateng: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary wrote to all police forces and authorities on 4 November 1998 with guidance to meet the 2 per cent. year-on-year efficiency target set by Government's Comprehensive Spending Review. A copy of the letter was placed in the Library. The guidance, which was prepared in consultation with Her Majesty's Treasury, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC), the Association of Chief Police Officers, the Association of Police Authorities and the Audit Commission, sets out the information required in the efficiency plan and a pro forma for completion. It also lists areas identified by HMIC and the Audit Commission where there may well be scope of significant efficiency improvements, and which forces are encouraged to consider in preparing their plans.

Police forces can keep the resources released by achieving efficiency gains. The Government expect them to reinvest these resources to help improve delivery of frontline national and local policing priorities. The guidance makes clear that we will not consider cuts in officer numbers as an efficiency gain, except where forces can demonstrate that, in doing so, they have maintained or improved the existing level of service.

Criminal Record Checks

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the full cost to the Criminal Records Bureau of each criminal conviction certificate issued on an individual; what is the standard fee to be paid by individuals requesting a check; how many certificates he estimates will be requested per year *(a)* from people wishing to work in the voluntary sector, *(b)* from unemployed people, *(c)* from disabled people, *(d)* from all other individuals and *(e)* in total; and if he will make a statement. [68953]

Mr. Boateng: Once established, the Criminal Records Bureau will be self-financing through charging for each certificate to be issued as provided for under the Police Act 1997. The fee set for each certificate type will reflect the full cost to the Bureau of providing the service. We estimate that certificates will cost between five and around ten pounds depending on the level of certificate sought.

It is impossible to predict accurately likely demand for certificates once the Bureau is in full operation. We estimate however that there will be annual demand for around 5 to 6 million Criminal Conviction Certificates (CCCs), 2 to 3 million Criminal Record Certificates (CRCs) and 2 to 3 million Enhanced Criminal Record Certificates (ECRCs). Demand for certificates from any particular sector is ever more difficult to predict, but up to half the CRCs and ECRCs issued could go to those wishing to work, in a paid or unpaid capacity, in the voluntary sector. Based on figures prepared in 1996, we estimate there could be around 1 million applications a year for CCCs from the unemployed. No estimate has been made of the number of applications from disabled people.

Prisons (Charter Marks)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisons in England and Wales have been awarded a Charter Mark; if he will list them by date awarded; and if he will make a statement. [68954]

Mr. George Howarth: Ten Prison Service establishments in England and Wales currently hold the Charter Mark for part or all of the establishment. They are:

1996

Morton Hall prison

Holme House prison—Education Department

Exeter prison—Physical Education (PE) Department

1997

Erlestoke prison—Library

Kirkham prison

Wayland prison—PE Department

1998

Holme House prison—PE Department

Haverigg prison—PE Department and Library

Northallerton Young Offender Institution—Education Department

Doncaster prison—Premier Prison Services Ltd.

Garth prison.

Sergeant Gurpal Virdi

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about the *(a)* cause and *(b)* length of suspension of Sergeant Gurpal Virdi. [68739]

Kate Hoey: This is an operational matter for the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. He tells me that Police Sergeant Virdi was arrested on 15 April 1998 and has been suspended from duty. As the case remains under investigation, I cannot comment further.

Racist Attack (Hanwell)

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will call for a report about events following a racist attack in Hanwell in March 1998; and if he will make a statement. [68738]

Kate Hoey: The investigation of a particular crime is an operational matter for the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. He tells me that five racist incidents of which two were attacks were recorded in Hanwell in March 1998. If the hon. Member would like to let me have identifying details of the attack he has in mind, I will ask the Commissioner for the relevant information, and will write to the hon. Member accordingly.

Asylum Seekers

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has, under interim funding arrangements for asylum seekers, to assist local authorities in respect of families who declared their intention to seek asylum at the port of entry and are eligible for benefits. [68579]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: At present, asylum seekers with families who declare their intention to seek asylum at the port of entry may, if they qualify, be eligible for income support, housing benefit and assistance under the homelessness legislation. Local authority costs for such services are covered by the local government finance settlement in the normal way.

Sir Norman Fowler: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers arrived in this country without any documentation during 1998; what countries they claimed to come from; and if he will make a statement. [69302]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I regret that information on the number of asylum seekers who arrived in this country without any documentation could only be obtained by examination of individual case records and is, therefore, only available at disproportionate cost.

Sir Norman Fowler: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many applicants for political asylum arrived as passengers at each *(a)* port and *(b)* airport in England and Wales, during the last quarter of (i) 1997 and (ii) 1998; and if he will make a statement; [69305]

(2) how many applicants for political asylum arrived as passengers at each *(a)* port and *(b)* airport in England and Wales, during *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* 1998; and if he will make a statement. [69304]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information requested is given in the table.

There was a temporary drop in asylum claims after the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 but the figures have since increased. We inherited the current asylum legislation and will seek to amend it in a new Bill shortly.

Applications [1] received for asylum at ports in the England and Wales, excluding dependants, by location where made, 1997 and 1998

Number of principal applicants

Port	*1997*[2]	*October to December 1997*	*1998*	*October to December 1998*
Ashford	25	5	35	10
Birmingham	50	15	50	10
Bristol	10	5	5	*
Cardiff	10	5	10	5
Cheriton	5	—	—	—
Dover	1,355	565	4,205	1,510
East Midlands	5	5	10	*
Felixstowe	65	15	80	25
Folkstone	5	5	30	*
Gatwick North	1,935	385	1,930	630
Gatwick South	1,065	285	1,310	385
Harwich	100	55	600	170
Heathrow Terminal 1	1,700	530	2,495	915
Heathrow Terminal 2	2,435	655	3,300	920
Heathrow Terminal 3	2,885	860	3,050	745
Heathrow Terminal 4	1,605	315	1,775	520
Hull	10	5	40	15
Humberside	5	—	*	—
Immigham	*	—	—	—
Leeds Bradford	20	5	15	5
Liverpool	10	5	10	*
London City	215	135	395	130
Luton	30	15	60	10
Manchester Terminal 1	10	*	25	10
Manchester Terminal 2	200	50	375	110
Newhaven	5	*	50	15
Norwich	*	—	10	10
Plymouth	10	5	5	—
Poole	*	*	—	—
Portsmouth	15	5	70	30
Preston	*	—	—	—
Prestwick	*	—	—	—
Ramsgate	55	10	5	—
Sheffield City	10	5	15	5
Southampton	5	*	*	*
Stanstead	350	120	300	85
Swansea	5	5	*	—
Teesport	20	—	20	—
Tilbury	*	—	*	—
Tyne	5	*	35	10
Waterloo	2,230	465	2,820	705
Total England and Wales	16,485	4,540	23,145	6,995
Other ports	100	35	200	30
Total port applications	16,590	4,575	23,345	7,020

[1] Provisional figures, rounded to the nearest 5 with * = 1 or 2
[2] Revised
Source:
Immigration Research and Statistics Service, RDS

Sir Norman Fowler: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers made applications in the last quarter of *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* 1998; and if he will make a statement. [69303]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The number of asylum applications made in the last quarter of 1997 was 8,455. In the last quarter of 1998 the figure was 14,400. After the then record year for asylum claims in 1991, the previous Administration introduced legislation to control abuse of the asylum system. It temporarily reduced the numbers applying after the Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act 1993, but those figures started to rise to similar levels after a time.

After 1996, new legislation produced another temporary reduction in claims, but since then the figures have risen again. The asylum legislation currently in place is that of previous Administrations. The present Administration will introduce a Bill to amend it shortly.

Sir Norman Fowler: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will estimate the number of dependants accompanying those who made applications for political asylum in each of the last two years. [69301]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: It is estimated that in 1997, 8,980 dependants accompanied applicants for asylum in the United Kingdom. The estimate for 1998 is 11,970. This information relates to dependants applying with the principal applicant or arriving subsequently, before the principal application was decided. It excludes dependants who arrive after the principal decision.

Special Advisers

Sir Norman Fowler: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the functions of his special advisers, together with their terms of contract, indicating *(a)* pay, *(b)* pension provision and *(c)* other benefits. [69337]

Mr. Straw: Justin Russell advises me on policy matters and Ed Owen is my adviser on media and political matters. They are employed under terms and conditions set out in the Model Contract for Special Advisers, a copy of which had been placed in the Library.

For information on salaries, I refer the right hon. Member to the reply my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) on 16 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *354–55*.

In line with the practice of successive Administrations, information on the salaries and the paybill costs for individual Special Advisers is not provided in order to protect the privacy of the individuals concerned.

Prison Radio Stations

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prison radio stations are operated by inmates in prisons in England and Wales; and if he will make a statement. [68830]

Mr. George Howarth: Feltham young offender institution has the only radio station operated by inmates in establishments in England and Wales.

The radio station is funded by a charity called Friends of Feltham. The inmates involved are paid by the establishment in the same way as all inmates involved in purposeful activity.

Prisoners (Incarceration)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the average number of hours per day during 1998 that prisoners in prisons were locked in their cells. [68857]

Mr. George Howarth: During the calendar year 1998, prisoners were locked in their cells for an average of 15.4 hours on weekdays and for an average of 16.3 hours at weekends.

Prisons (Pre-release Programme)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisons in England and Wales operate a pre-release programme; and if he will make a statement. [68832]

Mr. George Howarth: There are no central records of the number of prisoners operating pre-release programmes. Preparing prisoners for release is extremely important and the Prison Service provides assistance in a variety of ways. These include the delivery, by specially trained prison and probation staff and specialists from a range of voluntary organisations, of a range of advice and information on, for example, accommodation, employment, parenting skills and substance abuses.

Prisoner Complaints

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the average period of time taken by his Department to respond to complaints made to them by an inmate serving a prison sentence in England and Wales was in each of the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [68831]

Mr. George Howarth: This information is not recorded centrally and could only be obtained at a disproportionate cost. However, the prisoner requests complaints procedure provides that prisoners should receive a reply within six weeks, and if that is not possible, they should receive an interim reply explaining the delay. There have been some delays in dealing with requests and complaints in Prison Service headquarters, and improved procedures are currently being put in place to keep prisoners informed of progress.

Hillsborough Disaster

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place those in Liverpool City Library those documents held by his Department relating to the Hillsborough disaster. [68854]

Mr. Boateng: As much of the evidence as possible considered by Lord Justice Stuart-Smith's scrutiny of the Hillsborough disaster has already been placed in the Library and it is open to Members to arrange for their constituents to view it there. We have no plans to place copies of the material in Liverpool City Library and I am sorry that my reply to my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), 26 October 1998, *Official Report*, column 3, gave that impression. I subsequently wrote to my right hon. Friend on 7 December setting out the position and placed a copy of that letter in the Library.

South Yorkshire Police

Maria Eagle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what reports he has received from *(a)* the South Yorkshire Police Authority and *(b)* South Yorkshire Police, on the costs to the South Yorkshire Police Authority of funding the defence of David Godfrey Duckenfield and Bernard Dean Murray in the cases of Adlington v Murray and Adlington v Duckenfield; and on what dates he received those reports. [68844]

Mr. Boateng: We have received no reports on the costs to the South Yorkshire Police Authority other than the information contained in my reply I gave on 1 February 1999, *Official Report*, column *428*. This information was obtained from the South Yorkshire Police on 28 January and confirmed by the Police Authority on 1 February.

Mercenaries

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list those cases of criminal prosecution relating to the activities of mercenaries and private military companies which *(a)* have been brought and *(b)* have been brought successfully since 1987. [68694]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is not held on the Home Office Court Proceedings Database.

Crime Statistics

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the total number of convictions expressed as a proportion of the total number of recorded crimes in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [68608]

Mr. Boateng: The available information is given in the table:

Offenders convicted for indictable offences[1] as a proportion of the total number of notifiable offences recorded by the police[2], England and Wales, 1993–97

Year	*Percentages*
1993	5.8
1994	6.2
1995	6.2
1996	6.2
1997	7.2

[1] Indictable offences including those triable-either-way.
[2] Excluding other criminal damage of value £20 and under. Includes estimates for criminal damage over £20 for Merseyside and Metropolitan Police.

Circus Animals

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received in respect of the treatment of circus animals; and what plans he has to review the regulations governing their use. [69015]

Mr. George Howarth: Representations have been received from the all party parliamentary group for animal welfare, Members of Parliament, animal defenders and members of the public.

The legislation—the Protection of Animals Act 1911 and the Performing Animals (Regulation) Act 1925—make it a criminal offence to cause any unnecessary suffering to any domestic or captive wild animal. Trainers and exhibitors of circus animals are required to be registered with the local authority. Officers of local authorities have the power of entry to premises in which performing animals are being kept for training or exhibition and powers to inspect those animals.

The Home Office is planning to issue guidance to local authorities about these powers. The Department will also be seeking information about the welfare of circus animals which are kept in winter quarters. Once this information has been obtained, we will consider the matter further. In the meantime, we expect local authorities to be robust in their enforcement of existing legislation governing the use of animals in circuses.

Drug Suppliers

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the outcome has been of the consultation exercise that has been undertaken on the proposal to introduce a Drug Supply Offender Protection Order; and if he will make a statement. [69802]

Mr. George Howarth: An undertaking was given during the passage of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 to consult on the proposal to introduce a Drug Supply Offender Protection Order. A consultation paper was issued on 23 June, copies of which were placed in the Library together with a list of the organisations to whom it was sent.

The proposal would enable magistrates, on application, to impose an Order requiring anyone convicted or cautioned of a drug supply offence in this country or overseas to refrain from any act, if that was considered necessary to protect the public from the supply of drugs.

The consultation exercise has revealed little support for such an Order. The overwhelming view expressed is that the present legislation is adequate and that the Order would have little impact on the present levels of misuse.

This response to the exercise has confirmed our view that there would be no advantage in introducing such an Order at present.

Wild-caught Primates

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on how many occasions permission was given for the use of wild-caught primates for research purposes during 1998; and what was *(a)* the species of primate used, *(b)* the source country, *(c)* the number of primates used and *(d)* the research for which permission was given. [69282]

Mr. George Howarth: During 1998, one project licence authorising the use of wild-caught non-human primates was granted. Under this licence, four wild-caught baboons, obtained from Kenya, were used in heart xenotransplantation research during 1998. Two further wild-caught rhesus macaques were used in neuroscience research under the authority of a licence granted before 1998. These were obtained before 1996. It was not possible to check their country of origin in the time available.

Primates (Xenotransplantation Research)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on how many occasions inspectors of scientific procedures involving animals have asked for primates used in xenotransplantation research to be destroyed to prevent unacceptable levels of pain or distress in each of the last three years. [69290]

Mr. George Howarth: I will write to the hon. Member.

Transgenic Pigs (Medical Research)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many transgenic pigs have been released under the Animal (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 for export from the United Kingdom for use in medical research and experimentation in each month since May 1997. [69291]

Mr. George Howarth: The information requested is as follows:

Month	*Number of Pigs*	*Destination*
June 1997	[1]5	USA
August 1997	[1]7	Japan
November 1997	4	Netherlands
April 1998	[1]12	Canada
April 1998	10	Spain
April 1998	[1]21	Spain
May 1998	2	Netherlands
June 1998	[1]21	Italy
June 1998	5	Spain
September 1998	[1]8	Canada

[1] These animals were exported for use in breeding programmes rather than for use in scientific procedures

Imported Primates (Journey Times)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the (i) longest and (ii) average recorded journey time of primates imported to the United Kingdom for research purposes during 1998 from *(a)* China, *(b)* Mauritius, *(c)* Indonesia and *(d)* the Philippines. [69281]

Mr. George Howarth: In accordance with the measures introduced in 1996, the Home Office only requires that an estimated total journey time be provided prior to each acquisition and that, after each acquisitions, confirmation be provided that the importation was in accordance with what had been authorised.

The information requested is as follows:

Country/journey details	*Average journey time*
China	
Longest—58 hours	52 hours
Mauritius	
Longest—38 hours	28 hours
Indonesia	
No importations during 1998	—
Philippines	
Longest—48 hours	[1]Estimated 30 hours

[1] It has not been possible to give an average journey time for acquisitions from the Philippines as the necessary information is still being collated

As a result of pressure on airlines from animal protection groups, it is now impossible to fly primates directly to the United Kingdom. Instead, they are usually flown into mainland Europe and then transported to the United Kingdom by road and ferry, increasing the journey times and the associated stress for the animals.

Home Detention Curfew Scheme

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many of the prisoners released on 28 January, subject to home detention curfew, had *(a)* one previous conviction and *(b)* more than one previous conviction for offences to which Part I of the Sex Offenders Act 1997 applies; [69191]

(2) how many of the prisoners released on 28 January, subject to home detention curfew were serving a sentence of imprisonment for an offence of violence and had *(a)* one previous conviction for violence and *(b)* more than one previous conviction for violence. [69192]

Mr. George Howarth: Five of the 38 prisoners placed on home detention curfew on 28 January were serving sentences for offences of violence. Offenders required to register under the Sex Offenders Act 1997 will only be placed on home detention curfew in exceptional circumstances. No offender who was serving a sentence for an offence covered by Part 1 of the Sex Offenders Act 1997 was placed on home detention curfew on 28 January. The data on previous convictions are not immediately available and I will write to the hon. Member when this has been collated.

Appeal Court

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the median time taken for the Criminal Cases Review Commission to reach a decision on reference to the Appeal Court. [67830]

Mr. Boateng: I understand that since April 1997, the median time taken, from receipt of the application, to reach a decision on cases (other than those which the Commission has determined do not meet the eligibility criteria laid down by the Criminal Appeal Act 1995) was 212 working days.

Prison Service (Dogs)

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many dogs are currently employed by Her Majesty's Prison Service in England and Wales. [69094]

Mr. George Howarth: The total number of dogs in the Prison Service at the end of January 1999 were 752. These are broken down as:

462: German shepherd dogs of which 18 are dual purpose dogs.

178: Active drug dogs.

34: Passive drug dogs.

78: Arms and explosive search dogs.

Prisons (Illegal Drugs)

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what public funds have been spent in each of the last three years on mandatory drug tests in prisons. [68996]

Mr. George Howarth: There is a central budget covering expenditure on laboratory analysis, a courier service, collection kits and stationery. Expenditure from that budget in the last three years has been as follows:

Year	*£*
1996–97	1,076,381
1997–98	1,599,137
April 1998 to January 1999	1,100,000

These figures do not include the cost of staff who collect the samples and provide administrative support. Responsibility for meeting these costs is devolved to

each prison governor. Information on this element of expenditure is not readily available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the amount of illegal drugs discovered in each of Her Majesty's prisons in each of the last three years. [68997]

Mr. George Howarth: The table lists for each of Her Majesty's prisons in England and Wales for the last three years, the number of finds of illegal drugs discovered. No central record of the aggregate amount of the drug is kept.

Drug finds in Prisons 1996–98

Prison	*Total drug finds per establishment per year 1996*	*1997*	*1998*
Acklington	31	37	46
Albany	15	4	—
Aldington	10	6	5
Altcourse	—	—	65
Ashwell	32	59	52
Askham Grange	3	2	5
Aylesbury	36	19	24
Belmarsh	9	6	38
Birmingham	95	120	101
Blakenhurst	180	193	156
Blundeston	37	55	46
Brinsford	93	65	41
Bristol	47	64	79
Brixton	81	41	63
Brockhill	12	17	29
Buckley Hall	58	48	36
Bullingdon	47	59	74
Bullwood Hall	6	5	7
Camp Hill	25	15	7
Canterbury	47	25	11
Cardiff	227	206	136
Castington	15	16	13
Channings Wood	39	36	25
Chelmsford	92	105	73
Colchester	—	6	—
Coldingley	6	9	7
Cookham Wood	7	6	6
Dartmoor	45	32	25
Deerbolt	38	29	16
Doncaster	349	293	176
Doncaster	349	293	176
Dorchester	5	1	4
Dover	40	26	28
Downview	2	1	2
Drake Hall	23	10	2
Durham	252	246	133
Eastwood Park	7	1	1
Elmley	105	39	24
Erlestoke	21	18	20
Everthorpe	37	39	37
Exeter	57	41	51
Featherstone	29	8	9
Feltham	308	231	124
Ford	46	110	36
Frankland	57	40	49
Full Sutton	41	13	21
Garth	61	46	37
Gartree	37	9	14
Glen Parva	226	183	120
Gloucester	47	55	45
Grendon	24	21	19
Guys Marsh	42	56	42
Haslar	—	1	—
Hatfield	10	4	—
Havering	61	47	44
Hewell Grange	4	2	7
Highdown	98	65	3
Highpoint	36	64	63
Hindley	66	41	18

Drug finds in Prisons 1996–98

Prison	*Total drug finds per establishment per year 1996*	*1997*	*1998*
Hollesley Bay	49	53	41
Holloway	97	82	56
Holme House	62	91	58
Hull	75	41	22
Huntercombe	6	3	1
Kingston	2	—	—
Kirkham	39	46	16
Kirklevington	4	2	—
Lancaster	21	15	14
Lancaster Farms	72	47	36
Latchmere House	—	1	—
Leeds	135	96	97
Leicester	171	115	63
Lewes	82	75	46
Leyhill	2	—	4
Lincoln	92	86	72
Lindholme	159	119	63
Littlehey	46	23	30
Liverpool	176	145	62
Long Lartin	10	4	15
Lowdham Grange	—	—	47
Low Newton	38	11	12
Maidstone	15	15	30
Manchester	84	102	100
Moorland	74	88	98
Morton Hall	3	15	11
New Hall	9	8	6
North Sea Camp	6	15	4
Northallerton	33	38	25
Norwich	63	69	83
Nottingham	14	35	67
Onley	51	21	28
Parc	—	1	64
Parkhurst	80	48	28
Pentonville	94	124	115
Portland	51	25	22
Preston	108	104	85
Ranby	34	28	26
Reading	41	71	18
Risley	122	74	100
Rochester	8	4	2
Send	2	1	—
Shepton Mallet	6	9	3
Shrewsbury	20	29	28
Stafford	88	86	50
Standford Hill	21	26	8
Stocken	30	21	19
Stoke Heath	37	22	4
Styal	26	16	18
Sudbury	1	34	15
Swaleside	22	4	23
Swansea	36	47	35
Swinfen Hall	6	3	19
The Mount	59	44	21
The Verne	41	33	37
Thorn Cross	57	62	40
Usk	4	3	2
Wakefield	16	8	5
Wandsworth	146	55	60
Wayland	66	69	89
Wealstun	19	8	11
Weare	—	—	9
Wellingborough	12	11	30
Werrington	3	2	3
Wetherby	10	8	10
Whatton	—	1	—
Whitemoor	35	17	21
Winchester	33	12	2
Wolds	124	76	55
Woodhill	104	62	35
Wormwood Scrubs	155	111	51
Wymott	4	23	4
Total	6,835	5,840	4,689

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Food Industry (Marketing)

15. **Mr. Olner:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what measures his Department is taking to improve marketing in the food industry. [67810]

Mr. Nick Brown: We pursue a range of activities to help the agri-food industry improve competitive performance, including marketing. We also work with industry initiatives in this area.

Battery Hens

16. **Ms Ryan:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what measures he has taken to improve the welfare of battery hens. [67811]

Mr. Morley: We are continuing to work with our EU partners to develop improved welfare standards for laying hens in battery cages and to set, for the first time, Community wide standards for non-cage systems. We have made it clear in these negotiations that our long term aim is to phase out cages altogether.

Genetically Modified Foods

17. **Mr. Colman:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has had with the food industry in relation to genetically modified foods. [67812]

Mr. Rooker: The issue of genetically modified foods has featured on the agenda of various on-going meetings which I have had with the food industry.

Meat Hygiene Inspectors

18. **Mr. Greenway:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement about contingency plans in the event of a strike by meat hygiene inspectors. [67813]

Mr. Rooker: Contingency Plans were drawn up to minimise the effect of industrial action by some Meat Hygiene Service staff. Food safety, public health and animal welfare were fully protected.

The MHS strictly enforced meat hygiene, specified risk material and animal welfare Regulations in all licensed plants whether or not they were able to operate on the day of strike action. The Contingency Plans were successful in achieving their objectives for the GB meat industry as a whole.

24. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what proposals he has for studies of the work of meat inspectors. [67820]

Mr. Rooker: There are no proposals for studies of the work of meat inspectors with respect to the relationship between the inspectors and plant operators.

The Meat Hygiene Service is an enforcement Agency carrying out a difficult but crucial job of protecting public health and animal welfare occasionally in a hostile environment. The MHS seeks to work in co-operation with plant management rather than confrontation. A balance must be struck between effective enforcement and unnecessary over-regulation and I believe that the MHS is getting it right.

Non-European Union Imports

19. **Mr. Chope:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement about food safety standards for imports from outside the EU. [67814]

Mr. Nick Brown: Protecting the public by ensuring that food is produced to high standards of safety is a priority for the Government. Imports from outside the EU are required to have been produced to the same, or equivalent, standards as domestic produce.

Food and Animal Welfare Standards

20. **Mr. Burns:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement about the cost to British farmers of compliance with food and animal welfare standards. [67815]

Mr. Morley: The cost of compliance with statutory food and animal welfare standards is considered as part of the full regulatory impact assessment we now provide on any proposed changes to legislation. It is, of course, also necessary to consider the cost and other implications of non-compliance in these important areas.

British Beef

21. **Mr. Pike:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps his Department has taken to persuade local authorities in England not to place an arbitrary restriction on the purchase of British beef and beef products. [67816]

Mr. Rooker: The Ministry is not well placed nor resourced to lobby local authorities, which are obliged to look for best value for money in their procurement decisions. However, we continue to support the work of the Meat and Livestock Commission in its efforts to re-instate beef on school menus.

Small Farm Sector

22. **Mr. Sheerman:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to encourage innovation and diversification in the small farm sector. [67818]

Mr. Morley: Funding is available to the small farm sector to encourage a wide range of agricultural activities, including innovation and farm diversification, in the six areas designated to receive assistance under the English Objective 5b Structural Fund Programmes. No grant aid for farm diversification is currently available outside these areas but MAFF is consulting on options in the Agenda 2000 CAP reform rural development proposals. MAFF is working with the NFU to encourage collaboration among farmers. It is also organising seminars on farmers' markets and the speciality food sector.

Hill Farmers

23. **Jackie Ballard:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the current incomes of hill farmers in the United Kingdom. [67819]

Mr. Morley: The 1998 Autumn Review of Economic Conditions in the Hills and Uplands showed that, in the UK as a whole, net farm income on full-time cattle and sheep farms in the Less Favoured Areas was forecast to

fall by 67 per cent. in 1998/99. The statistical tables containing this, and other data, were laid before the House on 26 November 1998. This forecast did not include the payments to hill livestock farmers in the £120 million aid package announced by my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on 16 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *624–40*.

On 28 January 1999, my Department published provisional estimates of UK farm incomes and output in 1998. These estimates, which include the extra payments under the aid package, forecast a fall of 38 per cent. in net farm incomes on cattle and sheep farms in the Less Favoured Areas in 1998–99.

Common Agricultural Policy

25. **Mr. Andy King:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to press for reform of the common agricultural policy; and if he will make a statement. [67821]

Mr. Morley: We are continuing to press for comprehensive reform of the Common Agricultural Policy at meetings of the EU Agriculture Council in Brussels, with a view to bringing productions closer to the market.

We are seeking the gradual reduction and eventual phasing out of price and production-related agricultural support. We are also pushing for part of the savings from such a reduction in production support to be directed to measures which will protect and enhance the environment and help the rural economy adjust, particularly in more fragile rural areas.

28. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent representations he has received regarding reform of environmental measures under the CAP. [67824]

Mr. Morley: Representations on CAP reform, including reform of environmental measures, were most recently sought as part of a consultation process launched on 5 January. Responses have yet to be received or fully assessed.

Foodstuffs Importation Ban

26. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement about his Department's powers to ban importation of foodstuffs whose production standards are illegal in this country. [67822]

Mr. Rooker: Member States have powers to take protective measures under various pieces of EU legislation where there is a risk to public health.

Sustainable Rural Development

27. **Mr. Jenkins:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he has taken to promote sustainable rural development. [67823]

Mr. Morley: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Minister to my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Ms Russell) on 17 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 1083.

Meat and Bone Meal

29. **Mr. Martlew:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps are being taken to dispose of meat and bone meal; and if he will make a statement. [67825]

Mr. Rooker: The Intervention Board has awarded the first large scale contract for incineration with energy recovery of meat and bone-meal (MBM) derived from the OTMS and is considering proposals from other potential service providers. The majority of MBM from animals slaughtered for human consumption is being safely landfilled in appropriately licensed sites.

Pesticides

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what proposals he has to ensure that a pesticide tax does not disadvantage British growers relative to their European competitors; [68237]

(2) what study he has made of the relative advantages of a pesticides tax as opposed to other measures adopted by other EU states to reduce pesticide usage. [68229]

Mrs. Roche: I have been asked to reply.

I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by the Economic Secretary to the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) on 26 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *218*.

Date Based Export Scheme

Dr. Strang: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress is being made in implementing the Date Based Export Scheme. [67817]

Mr. Rooker: We are currently considering the responses to the consultation on the Date Based Export Scheme (DBES) and making the necessary arrangements for the scheme to operate. I expect to lay the legislation necessary to implement the DBES later this month. However, the EC Commission need to carry out an inspection, report and set a date on which exports may resume.

Welsh and English Lamb

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to seek protection for *(a)* Welsh and *(b)* English lamb under European Union law relating to food labelling requirements. [68595]

Mr. Rooker: EC legislation on the protection of food names enables products from particular regions, with a specific quality or characteristic attributable to that region, to be protected against imitators. An application to protect "Welsh lamb" has been submitted to the European Commission for approval. Cases are being developed to protect lamb from a number of specific regions of England.

As I have already announced to the House, we will shortly be implementing the recommendation of the

Review of the Organic Aid Scheme that rates of aid for farmers converting to organic farming should be substantially increased.

Organic Farming

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what conversion payments have been made by region in each of the last five financial years to encourage farmers to switch to organic production; and if he will make a statement about the Organic Aid Scheme. [67711]

Mr. Morley: The Organic Aid Scheme was not in operation during the financial year 1993–94. Expenditure under the scheme in subsequent financial years, by region, is as follows:

£

Region	Total amount paid 1994–95	1995–96	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99 [1]
Carlisle	—	7,975	11,594	12,383	6,719
Northallerton	—	0	7,919	7,763	7,225
Crewe	—	4,011	6,556	15,892	11,267
Worcester	—	69,831	110,217	97,617	87,396
Nottingham	—	16,229	20,063	21,532	32,963
Cambridge	—	7,459	17,975	46,855	43,100
Reading	—	32,427	71,253	124,722	123,256
Bristol	—	62,82[illegible]	85,902	139,903	152,535
Exeter	—	39,264	42,840	105,667	99,088
Total	[2]—	240,018	374,319	572,334	563,549

[1] To end October 1998
[2] No significant expenditure

Departmental Responsibilities

Mr. Maude: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what responsibilities which his Department had prior to the Comprehensive Spending Review are to be *(a)* discontinued by his Department, *(b)* transferred to another department, *(c)* transferred to an executive agency and *(d)* added to his Department over the period 1998–99 to 2001–02. [68400]

Mr. Morley: In answer to parts *(a)* and *(d)* of the question, I refer the right hon. Member to the reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble) on 27 October 1998, *Official Report*, columns *156–58*. With the exception of work on food safety and standards, which will transfer to the proposed Food Standards Agency, MAFF is not proposing to transfer any responsibilities to another Department or to an executive agency.

PRIME MINISTER

Mr. Ewen Cameron

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister on how many occasions since May 1997 he has met Mr. Ewen Cameron, and if he will make a statement on the matters discussed. [69341]

The Prime Minister: As under previous administrations, it is not the normal practice to provide details of private meetings with specific individuals or organisations.

HEALTH

Head Lice

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 27 January 1999, *Official Report*, column *242*, on head lice, what help is available to parents on low incomes for the purchase of head lice treatments. [68926]

Ms Jowell: All medication, which includes treatment for head lice, is available free of charge, on prescription to children aged 0–16 and to those aged 16–18 who are in full-time education.

Prescribed medication is available free through the extensive charge exemption and remission arrangements which include those on low incomes. Details are in leaflet Health Circular 11, "Are you entitled to help with health costs", copies of which are available in the Library.

Aricept

Mr. Caton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which area health authorities in England and Wales fund the prescription of the drug Aricept to treat Alzheimer's Disease. [68919]

Mr. Denham: Donepezil Hydrochloride (Aricept) was prescribed on the National Health Service in all health authorities in England over the period October 1997 to September 1998. Questions relating to Wales are matters for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales.

Health Authority Wages

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 28 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns *324–26*, on average wages, if he will list the source data used. [68963]

Mr. Denham: The table gives average wages for the 78 New Earnings Survey areas. In my answer of 28 January 1999, *Official Report*, columns *324–26*, the figures for Brent and Harrow and Bedfordshire should have read £388.73 and £364.66 respectively.

£

Area	Average 1995	1996	1997	1995–97
City of London	639.58	672.3	708.64	673.51
Hackney	551.04	549.74	635.93	578.90
Tower Hamlets	532.58	521.50	567.02	540.37
City of Westminster	514.71	517.16	547.43	526.44
Islington	476.06	479.21	522.40	492.56
Lambeth	486.45	469.92	476.11	477.49
Camden	467.33	462.02	488.32	472.56
Hammersmith	428.56	458.06	516.66	467.76
Southwark	456.69	454.87	475.64	462.40
Hillingdon	432.43	463.27	490.12	461.94
Kensington & Chelsea	395.58	438.86	457.93	430.79
Kingston-upon-Thames	415.06	406.98	439.14	420.39
Berkshire	399.12	425.96	432.52	419.20
Surrey	387.62	409.61	431.72	409.65
Richmond-upon-Thames	354.90	435.52	438.05	409.49
Ealing	387.42	411.76	427.04	408.74
Hounslow	387.22	397.40	435.16	406.59
Wandsworth	373.06	409.10	430.22	404.13
Barking	383.39	385.98	405.00	391.46
Harrow	386.08	387.86	393.70	389.21
Sutton	352.57	389.76	424.73	389.02
Brent	372.19	404.97	387.59	388.25

£

Area	1995	Average 1996	1997	1995–97
Newham	355.64	366.31	434.75	385.57
Buckinghamshire	363.59	392.02	398.18	384.60
Hertfordshire	362.35	374.95	402.12	379.81
Croydon	348.70	367.38	381.62	365.90
Merton	346.42	372.86	378.12	365.80
Bexley	360.35	368.45	365.86	364.89
Bedfordshire	343.16	374.41	376.42	364.66
West Sussex	346.16	361.27	378.80	362.08
Haringey	334.61	345.23	395.62	358.55
Greenwich	330.29	367.73	372.36	356.79
Enfield	333.38	354.86	372.54	353.59
Wiltshire	327.65	347.69	377.83	351.05
Cheshire	339.45	349.81	362.34	350.53
Lewisham	358.53	363.76	324.22	348.83
Hampshire	332.05	344.72	366.21	347.66
Essex	335.08	346.89	356.59	346.19
Oxfordshire	328.23	346.99	362.88	346.03
Gloucestershire	331.71	345.06	361.32	346.03
Avon	334.69	338.95	363.97	345.87
Cambridgeshire	331.05	340.16	365.38	345.53
Barnet	322.99	342.01	362.29	342.43
Redbridge	327.72	328.49	355.96	337.39
Bromley	345.17	327.90	332.23	335.10
West Midlands	314.36	328.46	343.22	328.68
Northamptonshire	314.39	326.76	340.13	327.09
Kent	315.56	322.99	341.24	326.59
Warwickshire	308.94	325.48	344.86	326.43
Waltham Forest	301.63	351.57	324.93	326.05
Havering	333.15	312.04	331.71	325.64
Cleveland	302.50	327.41	344.62	324.84
Greater Manchester	308.95	321.58	340.50	323.67
Merseyside	310.15	315.63	336.19	320.66
Dorset	302.42	323.85	327.56	317.94
Derbyshire	298.88	322.53	329.85	317.08
Leicestershire	294.97	315.54	333.11	314.54
West Yorkshire	299.45	313.15	326.25	312.95
Humberside	303.21	305.75	319.51	309.49
Tyne & Wear	293.24	312.13	313.25	306.20
Lancashire	294.87	302.64	318.60	305.37
East Sussex	283.18	311.02	320.79	304.99
Suffolk	288.22	310.03	314.69	304.31
Nottinghamshire	291.85	297.09	320.70	303.21
Somerset	292.32	300.47	316.04	302.94
North Yorkshire	279.78	301.56	314.78	298.71
Cumbria	292.74	293.70	309.18	298.54
Staffordshire	285.77	298.16	309.57	297.84
Norfolk	280.63	300.71	310.70	297.35
Lincolnshire	271.37	304.48	315.92	297.26
South Yorkshire	284.70	293.03	310.22	295.99
Hereford & Worcester	285.59	296.57	304.90	295.69
Durham	279.75	295.17	309.70	294.87
Shropshire	275.77	291.88	299.97	289.21
Northumberland	274.56	282.50	290.66	282.57
Devon	272.92	279.66	294.33	282.30
Isle of Wight	267.55	284.76	292.83	281.71
Cornwall	249.00	259.30	274.29	260.86

Afro-Caribbean Women (Health Needs)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of mortality rates of Afro-Caribbean women; and what plans he has for health programmes to address these womens' health needs. [68741]

Ms Jowell: Mortality rates are available not by ethnic origin but by country of birth. Compared to the national average for women aged 20–69 years, mortality from all causes in 1989–1992 in England and Wales was higher by more than 25 per cent. for those born in West Africa and lower by nearly 10 per cent. for those born in the Caribbean, but not significantly different for those born in East Africa.

Last year's Green Paper "Our Healthier Nation" set out the two over-arching aims for our health strategy: to improve health and to tackle health inequality, both of which are relevant to black and minority ethnic health. In addition, the Green Paper indicated that the strategy will focus on some key national targets—all of which are themselves relevant to different ethnic communities, supported by a range of locally-set targets based on local needs. This is particularly important for ethnic health since needs are not spread uniformly across the country. Each area needs to consider and tailor its responses to local circumstances. It is here where the local Health Improvement Programmes will be crucial to both assess and target specific health needs, such as those of Afro-Caribbean women.

Autism

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* local health authorities provide placements for people with autism in communities in their area and *(b)* such placements there are, broken down by local health authority; and if he will make a statement. [68550]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is not available. It is for the local statutory authorities to determine the needs of people with autism in their area and provide appropriate placements.

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with representatives of health authorities about the provisions for treatment of *(a)* children with (i) Kannens autism and (ii) autism spectrum disorder and *(b)* young persons and adults with autism spectrum disorder; and if he will make a statement. [68553]

Mr. Hutton: We have not had any discussions with representatives of health authorities. It is for the local statutory authorities to determine the needs of children with autism in their area and work together effectively to ensure that these needs are met.

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

Mr. Lepper: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what timetable he has set for the production of reports by the Working Group on CFS/ME and its sub-groups; [68563]

(2) by whom in his Department the reports produced by the CFS/ME Working Group and sub-groups will be considered; and what plans he has to publish them; [68562]

Mr. Lepper: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the terms of reference of *(a)* the CFS/ME Working Group and *(b)* its children's sub-group whose membership was announced on 4 November 1998. [68561]

Ms Jowell: The terms of reference for the chronic fatigue syndrome/myalgic encephalomyelitis (CFS/ME) working group are; to review management and practice in the field of CFS/ME with the aim of providing best practice guidance for professionals, patients and carers to improve the quality of care and treatment for people with

CFS/ME. The children's sub-group has the same terms of reference although its primary focus will be issues specifically relating to children.

The work of the groups should be completed by the summer of 2000 and the final report published later that year. The report will be considered by the Chief Medical Officer, Professor Liam Donaldson. The Working Group was established by the previous CMO, Sir Kenneth Calman and its work has been taken forward by his successor, Professor Donaldson. The final report will be made freely available.

Mobile Phones

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received from mobile phone communications companies on the health aspects of the use of mobile phones. [69017]

Ms Jowell: Three mobile phone communications companies have made representations to the Department to discuss areas of common interest. In addition, Departmental officials have had discussions with the industry about possible research initiatives.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidelines his Department has issued on the potential health effects of the use of mobile phones; and what plans he has to commission further research in this area. [69016]

Ms Jowell: The Government obtain advice from the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) on the risks to health from exposure to electromagnetic fields, including those emitted by mobile phones. The NRPB's advice is that mobile phones currently used in the United Kingdom comply with their exposure guidelines (Restrictions on human exposure to static and time varying electromagnetic fields and radiation. Documents of the NRPB, 4, No 5,7–63 (1993)). Copies are available in the Library. These guidelines are intended to prevent acute adverse responses to increased heat load and elevated body temperature. The basis of these guidelines is the same as those of the International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection. Both organisations agree that the alleged (or potential) non-thermal effects which have occasionally been reported should not form the basis of exposure restrictions.

Research into potential effects of microwaves such as those emitted by mobile phones is being undertaken on a worldwide basis. The Department is contributing to these international initiatives and is also supporting its own research programme. Research is also carried out at the NRPB.

Beta-interferon

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if a waiting list for beta-interferon treatment has been drawn up by the West Sussex Health Authority. [69182]

Mr. Denham: No.

Ministerial Flights

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which ministers in his Department made use of *(a)* RAF and *(b)* chartered aircraft between 1 October 1998 and 31 January 1999; and if he will list the dates, destinations and costs of such flights. [69076]

Ms Jowell: There have been no occasions where a Department of Health Minister has used a Royal Air Force or privately chartered aircraft between 1 October 1998 and 31 January 1999.

Xenotransplantation

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health from whom the United Kingdom Xenotransplantation Interim Regulatory Authority has received applications for permission to conduct clinical trials of xenotransplantation; on what date each application was received; and for what types of procedure permission is being sought. [69292]

Mr. Hutton: To date, the United Kingdom Xenotransplantation Interim Regulatory Authority (UKXIRA) has received one application which complies with the requirements set out in

"Guidance on making proposals to conduct xenotransplantation on human subjects".

In addition, one applicant has been advised to re-submit an application in accordance with the requirements described in the Guidance.

Information submitted to the UKXIRA is supplied in confidence. An announcement will be made if an application is approved.

GP Fundholding

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what arrangements he is making to abolish GP fundholding. [69658]

Mr. Denham: Further to the oral answer I gave on 2 February 1999, *Official Report*, column 711, the position is as follows. The current general practitioner fundholding schemes will be brought to an end on 31 March 1999 through secondary legislation. The Health Bill makes provision for the abolition of GP fundholding. A residual fundholding scheme, to be made by regulations under current legislation, will operate from 1 April until the first practicable date after the Health Bill receives Royal Assent.

SCOTLAND

Local Enterprise Companies

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what guidance he has provided to chairmen of local enterprise companies in Scotland on making public statements on political issues; and if he will make a statement. [67395]

Mr. Dewar *[holding answer 26 January 1999]:* None. Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise delegate extensively the exercise of their powers and functions to local enterprise companies. Their activities are governed by the terms of their contractual relationships with Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise. LEC Board members are also expected to comply with the Code of Best Practice for Local Enterprise Companies Corporate Governance, which

focuses on integrity, accountability and openness. From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Student Fees

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what estimate he has made of the income to be raised by fees paid by students resident in England, Wales and Northern Ireland for their attendance at the fourth year or subsequent years of first degree courses at Scottish universities or colleges in the current year and each of the next five years. [67500]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 27 January 1999]:* Students subject to the requirement to make a contribution to fees will not be in the fourth year of a course at a Scottish university or college until academic year 2001–02. The income to be raised in respect of fourth year fees from English, Welsh and Northern Ireland students for academic years 1998–99, 1999–2000 and 2000–01 is therefore zero. At current prices it has been estimated that contributions which will be paid by students domiciled in England, Wales and Northern Ireland will be approximately £2 million in academic year 2001–02 and thereafter. From 1 July 1999, this will be a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

McMillan Conversion Course

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list, in relation to the McMillan two year open learning conversion course for second-level registered nurses *(a)* the level of funding provided, *(b)* the planned increase in funding and *(c)* the estimated number who will qualify each year; and if he will issue guidance to trusts on the selection of students for this course and on leave for attending. [67678]

Mr. Galbraith: The McMillan two-year open learning course is one of several different courses in Scotland for the conversion of second level to first level nurses. The Scottish Office funds some places on such courses through its contracts with Universities and Colleges for pre-registration nursing and midwifery education. However, education institutions have flexibility to decide, in the light of local demand, how many places to allocate to conversion courses and how many to other courses covered by their contracts. It is also for them to determine the nature of their second to first level conversion courses. Many do so through open learning, and some use the course published by McMillan.

The number of places taken up in 1998–99 and 1999–2000 will depend on the demand for second level conversion courses. During 1996–97, 274 second level nurses in Scotland completed conversion courses. In 1997–98, the number was 310. These figures include nurses funded by their employer or privately as well as those funded by The Scottish Office.

The only criteria required for entry to a second-level conversion course is that the candidate is a second level registered nurse. The nature of open learning is that students do not require leave to attend the course. They do, however, require to undertake a period of clinical experience. Most of this can be done in the area in which the second level nurse normally works.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Departmental Legislation

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what additional legislation, not currently before Parliament, was assumed in the production of his Department's spending allocation for 1999–2000 to 2001–02 in the Comprehensive Spending Review. [68414]

Mr. Timms: There is a long-standing convention that legislative proposals for each year are not announced before the Queen's Speech at the start of the relevant Session.

Pensions Review

Mr. Alan Keen: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many representations were received on the Pensions Review; and how many recommended an increase in the *(a)* level and *(b)* scope of the basic state pension. [68704]

Mr. Timms: A total of 2,228 responses were received by the Pensions Review. The information on the content of the responses is not available in the form requested. 661 of the responses raised the issue of the uprating of the basic state pension; and 1,002 raised other issues relating to the basic state pension.

Single Room Rent Provision

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what research his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on the impact of the single room rent provision for those aged under 25 years on (i) rent arrears and (ii) homelessness, on that age group. [68702]

Angela Eagle: Together with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the Department has commissioned the London Research Centre to investigate Housing Benefit and the private rented sector. The study includes interviews with young people who have had their Housing Benefit restricted under the single room rent (SRR) rules, as well as with other tenants, landlords, Housing Benefit Officers and Rent Officers. The study has been conducted in six case study areas and will provide evidence on the effects of the SRR and on rent arrears, though not directly on homelessness, which is difficult to establish. The report is expected to be published in the Spring.

The Department has received a number of reports from outside organisations which present findings of studies into the impact of the single room rent provision. These reports are localised and they vary in their scope and quality. All these reports, together with the findings of a study funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, are being considered by the Department.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many individuals have been subject to the single room rent provision for those aged under 25 years in each of the last three years for which figures are available. [68699]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

As at 31 May 1997, 29,000 individuals aged under 25 years were subject to the single room rent provision, and of these 16,000 had their rent restricted. The May 1998 data will be published at the end of this month.

Source:

Housing Benefit Management Information System annual 1 per cent. sample taken at the end of May 1997.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what representations he has received on the single room rent provision for those aged under 25 years; [68706]

(2) what plans he has to review the single room rent provision for those aged under 25 years; and if he will make a statement; [68700]

(3) what plans he has to meet with welfare and voluntary sector organisations to discuss the single room rent provision for under 25 year olds. [68826]

Angela Eagle: Representations about the single room rent (SRR) provision for under 25 year olds have been received from hon. Members, members of the public and a variety of voluntary and charitable organisations. We are reviewing with the Local Authority Associations the Housing Benefit rules with a view to simplifying and improving the scheme. The SRR rules form part of that review. We have already met with a number of these organisations to invite their views.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what assessment he has made of the impact of the single room rent provision for those aged under 25 years on the take-up of employment by that group; [68703]

(2) what assessment he has made of the level of housing benefit fraud linked to the single room rent provision for those aged under 25 years; [68701]

(3) what assessment has been made of the number of persons who have changed accommodation as a result of the single room rent provision for those aged under 25 years. [68707]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available.

Pension Payments (Computer Difficulties)

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many payments to private pension schemes have been delayed due to computer difficulties; how many payments have been delayed *(a)* up to three, *(b)* three to six, *(c)* six to nine, *(d)* nine to 12 and *(e)* over 12 months, indicating the size of the compensation payments for each of these groups; and if payments will take account of changes in the equity market. [68823]

Mr. Timms: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

The calculation of the National Insurance Rebates contains an assumption that they are paid in the October following the end of the tax year for which they are due. Normally around 90 per cent. of payments have been made by that date, and a further 95 per cent. by December. This year by October, 14 per cent. had been paid, and by December, 46 per cent. Currently, 67 per cent. has been paid.

We recognise the need to pay compensation for payments that have been delayed after October and arrangements are in place to pay 0.5 per cent. per month for each month of delay. The November payments therefore included compensation at the rate of 0.5 per cent., the December payment at 1 per cent., the January payment 1.5 per cent. and the February payment 2 per cent. Approximately £15.3 million in compensation has been paid to occupational and personal pension schemes in respect of individual scheme members up to February 1999.

The level of compensation was discussed with the Government Actuary's Department who agreed that 0.5 per cent. per month represented a reasonable level of compensation given the prevailing market conditions in September 1998, and on the assumption that the arrangements put in place at that time were designed to cover a few months delay. This continues to be their view, and we have no plans to review this rate.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to reform the Child Support Agency; and if he will make a statement. [68856]

Angela Eagle: I refer the hon. Member to the written answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) on 26 January 1999, *Official Report,* column *237.*

Benefits Agency

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many staff in the Benefits Agency have been employed for less than *(a)* three months, *(b)* six months, *(c)* one year and *(d)* two years. [68941]

Angela Eagle: The administration of the Benefits Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Peter Mathison. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Terry Rooney, dated 3 February 1999:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many staff in the Benefits Agency have been employed for less than *(a)* three months, *(b)* six months, *(c)* one year and *(d)* two years.

The information you have asked for is included in the attached table.

As at 31 December 1998 the Agency employed 66,638 members of staff who had been employed for two years or more.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Benefits Agency permanent and fixed term appointment staff by length of service as at 31 December 1998

Length of service	*Permanent and fixed-term contract*	*Casual staff*
Less than 3 months	1,478	1,258
3 to 6 months	1,429	1,251
6 months to 1 year	2,342	1,093
1 to 2 years	1,718	291
Total	6,967	3,893

Note:

Figures are provisional and subject to change

Benefits System

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on implementing the policy in the Green Paper, "A New Contract for Welfare", on making the cost of the benefits system more transparent, indicating what further measures are planned in the current year. [69097]

Mr. Timms: The Green Paper proposed "greater transparency about entitlement and costs" as one of the measures of success in tackling fraud and error in Social Security. We are committed to making the public more aware of the cost of fraud and error. We will be publishing our strategy on combating fraud and error shortly.

Deprived Neighbourhoods

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on implementing the policy in the Green Paper, "A New Contract for Welfare", on introducing a better model for tackling effectively the linked problems of the most deprived neighbourhoods. [69099]

Angela Eagle: The Social Exclusion Unit's report "Bringing People Together: a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal" was published on 15 September and provided a detailed picture of the concentration of problems in poor neighbourhoods. The report proposed 18 Policy Action Teams to focus on specific areas, and their findings, the last of which is expected at the end of this year, will form the basis of a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal.

Ministers Flights

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security which ministers in his Department made use of *(a)* RAF and *(b)* chartered aircraft between 1 October 1998 and 31 January 1999; and if he will list the dates, destinations and costs. [69078]

Mr. Timms: None.

NIRS2

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of how many pensioners whose income has been affected by delays in the implementation of the NIRS2 system will have died before they receive *(a)* repayment and *(b)* compensation where it is due; and in how many of these cases the estate will revert to the Treasury. [69297]

Mr. Timms: The information is not available.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if widows who have had to choose between receiving widows' pension, or receiving retirement pension without access to their and their husband's full national insurance contribution records, as a result of delays to the implementation of NIRS2, will be allowed to change their decision once the system is fully operational. [69296]

Mr. Timms: Where a widow has had to make the choice between remaining in receipt of Widow's Benefit, transferring to Retirement Pension or deferring her pension to accrue increments based on incomplete information because of the NIRS2 problems, and her choice is shown to be disadvantageous to her when full details are known, she will be able to review her decision and revise her choice from the original date if she so wishes.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the indicator period set for each contributions-based benefit which the delay in payment of benefit due to the failure of the NIRS2 computer system must exceed in order for the possibility of compensation to be considered. [69298]

Mr. Timms: On Monday 1 February, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security announced a scheme to pay flat rate compensation of £10 to all Retirement Pensioners, Widows Benefit beneficiaries and Incapacity Benefit recipients who have suffered an unreasonable delay as a result of the problems with NIRS2.

Within the normal Departmental Compensation Scheme, the indicator period which has to be exceeded before payment of compensation is considered is as follows:

	Period
Retirement Pension	8 months
Widows Benefit	4 months
Incapacity Benefit	4 months
Jobseeker's Allowance	3 months

Information on the indicator periods for all benefits is contained in leaflet GL22 "Tell us your comments and complaints", which is available from Benefit Agency offices.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps the Contributions Agency plans to take to recover the cost of compensating benefit recipients who have lost out as a result of delays in the implementation of the NIRS2 system, from Andersen Consulting. [69300]

Mr. Timms: We are considering all appropriate steps within the terms of the NIRS2 agreement.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the cost to the Contributions Agency of compensating all benefit recipients who have lost out as a result of delays in the implementation of the NIRS2 system. [69299]

Mr. Timms: Full details of the additional compensation scheme announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security on Monday 1 February have not yet been finalised. Our best estimate is that the costs will be between £3 million and £4 million. Estimates of administration costs and additional amounts payable through the existing Departmental arrangements will be made when details of the scheme are finalised.

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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

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This index to the daily parts and weekly Hansard is derived from the House of Commons Library's Parliamentary On-Line Indexing Service (POLIS), and the subject terms used are based on those used in POLIS. There are often changes in column numbering, etc., between the daily part or weekly Hansard (which simply collects together the daily parts without revision) and the bound volume. The index for the bound volume is revised to take account of these changes, and cannot, therefore, be used in conjunction with the daily part or weekly Hansard. For these versions use the Fortnightly Index.

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Abbreviations

Bills 1R = first reading, 2R = second reading, Com = Committee stage, Rep = Report stage, 3R = third reading, res = resolution, amendt/amendts = amendment/amendments, * = matter taken formally, without debate.

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